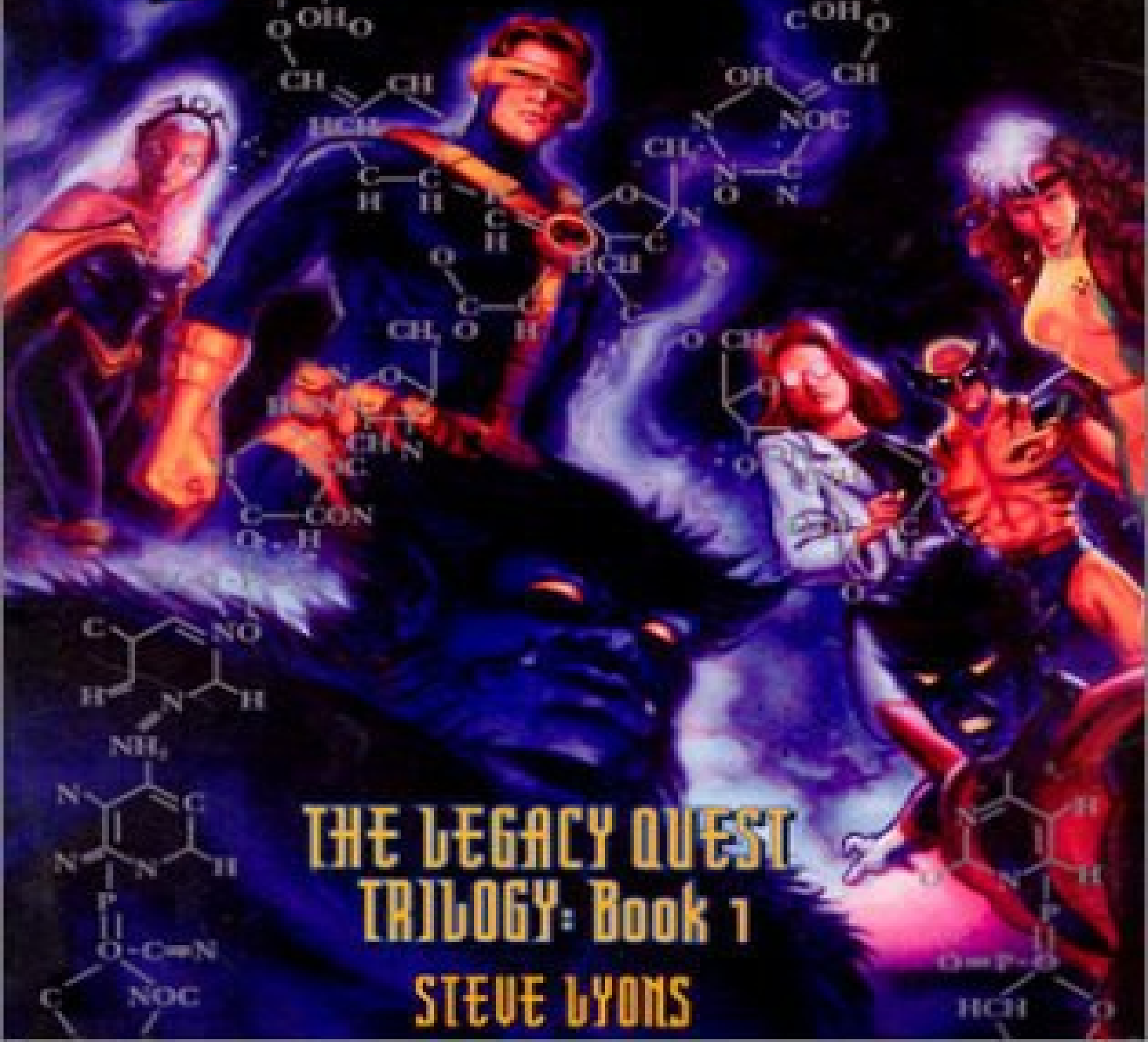


X-MEN



THE LEGACY QUEST
TRILOGY: Book 1

STEVE LYONS

THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY

X-MEN® THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 1 X-MEN®

THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 2 X-MEN® THE LEGACY
QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 3

Steve Lyons

ibooks

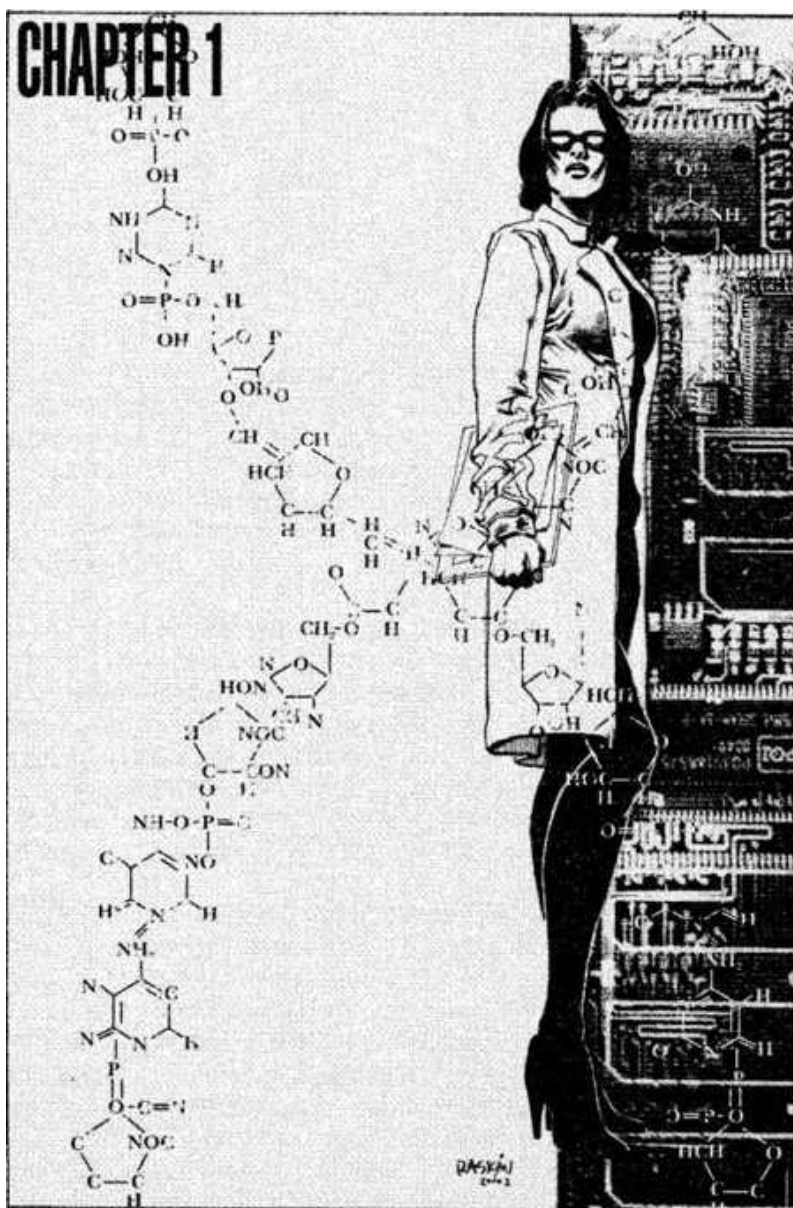
new york www.ibooks.net

X-MEN® THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 1 X-MEN®

THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 2 X-MEN® THE LEGACY
QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 3

X-MEr

THE LEGACY WEST TRILOGY: BOOK1



IT WAS the right kind of weather for a funeral.

The sun had not been seen all day. It had taken cover beneath a wispy blanket of clouds, as if sensing that it would not be welcome here on this gloomy November morning. The sky was gray, and its grayness seemed to leech all other colors from the cut flowers and the clapboard houses of this small, remote corner of New England. The air was cold enough to bite, and a weak but piercing wind howled as if in anguish through the trees.

The stranger took a deep breath, gathered his resolve and walked towards the wrought-iron gates of the town's small cemetery. He was a tall man, with a thin face, short red hair and freckled cheeks. At least, that was how he looked at the moment. As his feet crunched against the dead leaves on the ground, he felt an irrational fear that his disguise would not be good enough; that everybody would see through it, and see who-and what-he was. He buttoned up his black greatcoat, for the sake of appearances, as if trying to protect himself from a cold he didn't feel.

People had gathered at the gates. White vans sat among the black limousines, and the stranger recognized the logos of three different television networks on their sides. TV crews and newspaper journalists mingled with the crowd. Their presence seemed like an intrusion. Bathed in artificial light, a young man made a live report to the nation. His words were emotive, his expression carefully earnest, as he spoke into his handheld microphone. The stranger felt a rush of anger towards him, but fought it. He had a job to do, after all.

The funeral party had arrived a few minutes earlier. The stranger could see them through the railings: a cluster of dark figures, almost swallowed up by a gray sea of headstones. He had watched, his heart going out to them, as they had struggled to clear a way through the gates, with the coffin of a lost friend or family member borne aloft on six shoulders.

Two grim-faced men had stationed themselves at either side of the entrance. They controlled the flow of people into the cemetery, and kept the paparazzi and the more obvious rubber-neckers out. They questioned anyone they didn't know, and searched them to ensure they had no cameras before allowing them to pass. The ceremony, they were determined, would be the one part of this tragic business that would not be broadcast to the world.

The stranger had to be there, but he hadn't reckoned on the guards. He quickened his pace slightly, turning his face from them even though they couldn't possibly have recognized him. He could probably have bluffed his way past them, but he couldn't have risked being searched. They would have found that his physical shape did not match his appearance.

And what would he have said to them anyway?

The stranger had traveled a long way to be here, and he wasn't sure why. He had never met the deceased. He had never even heard the name William Montgomeiy until a few days ago. And yet, the young man's death—and the media frenzy that had accompanied it— had had a more profound effect upon him than he could possibly have anticipated.

The stranger knew Montgomeiy's killer. He knew it very well indeed.

He rounded the corner of the cemeteiy, and kept on walking until the pack at the gates could no longer see him through the railings. He looked up at the metal spikes a foot above his head, and nodded confidently to himself. He cast one final, furtive glance up and down the street, to be sure that nobody was around to see what he did next. Then he crouched down, tensed his muscles and sprang forward, taking three bounding steps along the sidewalk before he launched himself into the air and twisted sideways. He somersaulted over the tops of the railings with an inch to spare, and made a perfect, almost soundless, landing on both feet on the far side.

For a long moment, then, the stranger squatted silently, almost expecting to hear shouts of outrage and fear. When he was sure his acrobatic feat had gone unnoticed, he pulled himself back up to his full height, adjusted his illusory tie and brushed dust from his coat.

Then, using the trees as cover, he picked his way stealthily towards the other mourners.

A weak, early afternoon sun was trying in vain to warm the frigid waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, where it met the North Sea off the coast of Scotland. Dark waves lapped against a lonely pillar of granite, which jutted obdurately out of the depths. Atop this pillar, light glinted off the towers and pylons of the Muir Island Genetic Research Center.

And, inside that center, one of the world's foremost geneticists was slumped over her lab bench, beginning to stir from a fitful sleep.

Doctor Moira MacTaggart didn't want to wake up, but an insistent pain in her neck and the stark electric light of her windowless laboratory dragged her from the comforting darkness. Perspiration had glued her face to the sleeve of her white coat. She tore it free, and sat up in her chair with a regretful sigh. Her throat was sore, but that was normal these days. She didn't know how long she had slept-this isolated, timeless environment gave her no clues-but she was still tired. Not just in body, but in mind and spirit too. The details of her dreams had already fled from her memory, but she knew they had been of a better world; a world that she was sorry to have left behind so soon.

The half-cup of coffee by her side was stone cold. A diy, brown ring stained the topmost paper in a haphazard pile of scribbled notes to herself. Notes that were all but useless now-but she still faced the dispiriting task of writing them up and filing them. There was always the smallest chance that some scrap of information might help in the future.

"I see no reason to continue," her lab partner had said yesterday morning. "Our initial hypothesis was hopelessly inaccurate. This entire endeavor has been an unmitigated disaster." Moira knew Doctor Henry McCoy well enough to know that the long words were an attempt to hide his feelings. But his strained tone had still betrayed his weariness and disappointment.

She had gritted her teeth and tried to ignore him, to focus on her work. On the slide beneath her microscope, a

numbingly familiar chemical reaction had been playing itself out. "You can give up if you want, Hank," she had responded, "but I'm seeing this through to the end."

Was that optimism, she wondered now, or just blind stubbornness?

She dragged herself to her feet and stretched her arms and legs, pushing out the kinks in her muscles. She massaged her neck, and stifled a yawn as she opened the heavy doors that separated her from the rest of the world. She stepped out into the bare, clinical corridors of her research facility, and flinched from the cold sunlight that streamed through the small, high windows and made dust motes dance before her eyes.

Sleep must have overcome her, at last, just as everybody else was rising. She had been unconscious for over six hours, but it felt like six minutes.

She was not as strong as she used to be. A year ago, she had pulled regular all-nighters without a problem. Now, she was tired all the time, and she felt as if she had a permanent cold. She smiled to herself ironically. If only her ailment were something that simple.

At times like this, Moira could almost feel the virus eating away at her from the inside, sinking its tendrils into her DNA strands, rewriting her very genetic makeup. She wondered how much more time she had.

Yesterday's conversation flashed through her mind again. She remembered Hank's voice: "The virus has corrupted the DNA sequence in the cell samples. Even in the improbable event that our anti-vaccine could begin to slow the reaction now, it would be too late."

"It would be something!" she had insisted.

"A false hope, nothing more. We can't reverse that sort of damage, Moira. We'd have to learn to map the entire human genome just to begin to try."

Didn't he think she knew that?

It was unlike Hank to be so terse, so irritable, so insensitive to her feelings. But the strain of the past few months had begun to take their toll on him. She had watched it happening. She had watched him crumbling, piece by piece, with each new setback, each dashed hope. She knew what he was going through, but not how to help him. He would have to come to terms with it in his own way, his own time.

Yesterday morning, Hank McCoy had walked out of the laboratory, head bowed, fists clenched in frustration. Twenty minutes later, the security systems had informed Moira that he had left the center, left the island altogether. Good. He had needed to get away for a few hours, to find time to think. And equally, Moira had needed to be left alone, to buy herself in work, to pursue this latest futile experiment to its conclusion. That was how she coped.

"We've already reached the end, Moira." Hank's last bitter words to her, as he left. "You can hold out for a miracle if you wish, but you're only denying what we both already know. We've turned into another cul-de-sac. This line of research has reached a dead end."

He had been right, of course.

She wondered where he was now.

The center was silent, almost eerily so. This building housed some of the most advanced technology known to Mankind, but Moira strained her ears to hear even a distant hum, to hear anything above the regular sound of her own shallow breathing. An involuntary shiver caught her by surprise. She ought to have been used to this, after all these years living out here. She had always valued her privacy, and enjoyed the peace that came with solitude. But it seemed a long time now since she had truly been alone.

What if she died here? What if her time ran out today? When would they find her?

She walked to the kitchen alcove, her footsteps filling the emptiness with hollow echoes. She made herself a fresh cup

of coffee using powdered creamer. She didn't like it, but she had become used to the taste. When you cut yourself off from civilization as she had, fresh milk was one of the many things that became a luxury. She leaned back against a worktop, removed her glasses so she could rub her weary eyes, and sipped at the hot liquid gratefully.

Hank had been gone for over twenty-four hours. Moira told herself not to worry. He had probably checked into a guesthouse on the Scottish mainland, or just roamed the Highlands overnight with no regard for the passage of time. But she couldn't rid herself of the nagging doubts. She had learned through experience that, where Hank McCoy and people like him were concerned, anything—almost literally, anything—could happen.

She wondered if she should call in the X-Men.

"So, what is the mood like in Newhill, Massachusetts today, Jon?" "Very subdued, Peter. As you know, this is a small town, a very close-knit community, and the death of Mr. Montgomery from the Legacy Virus has affected everybody. The funeral is taking place behind me as we speak—just through these railings here—and many shops and businesses are closed in Newhill this morning, as a mark of respect."

"Have you spoken to Mr. Montgomery's family?"

"Not yet, Peter. They've asked that the funeral should be a private affair, that they be left alone to grieve. I'm hoping to get a few words with them as they come out. But I have spoken to some of the other local residents, and they all say the same thing. They just can't believe this has happened here, especially not to somebody so young. I think you said earlier that William Montgomery was only twenty-nine years of age."

"A community in shock, then."

"Absolutely. A state of shock. A feeling of 'how could this happen here?' I spoke to one woman earlier, and she told me there's never even been a mutant sighting in Newhill."

“But the Legacy Virus doesn’t only target mutants any more, does it?”

“I’m afraid not, Peter. Mr. Montgomery’s parents insist their son was not a mutant, and the results of the post-mortem seem to confirm their claim. I think, for many of the people here, that this is the most frightening aspect of this tragedy: that apparently, no one is safe from what, until recently, was seen as an exclusively mutant disease. On top of all this, of course, is the worry that we don’t yet know how it might be transmitted: whether it’s airborne, or if you can catch it from contaminated food and water. We just don’t know.” “I’m sure a lot of our viewers, watching this, will be quite worried about this virus. What symptoms should we be looking out for, Jon?” “Well, in the early stages, the symptoms are a sore throat and a runny nose—a mild cold, basically. But after that, it becomes more difficult to predict. The Legacy Virus attacks its victims’ DNA, and there is still an awful lot we don’t know about that. Very often, it causes outbreaks of boils and lesions on the skin. We also know that some of the earliest victims, some mutants—and of course their DNA is very different to our own—lost control of their actual mutant powers. What you have to remember, Peter, is that this is still a very new disease, and research into it is only just beginning.”

“A lot of work still to be done, then.”

“A lot of work—and a long way to go before we can hope for a cure. But I should remind our viewers at home that cases of the Legacy Virus are still quite rare. There have only been a few confirmed cases in human beings so far. It appears to be spreading quite slowly.”

“But it *is* spreading, Jon.”

“Yes, Peter. It is spreading.”

Five time zones to the east of Newhill and its problems, a thin, almost gaunt, pale-skinned man sat in a small fishing boat with its engine turned off, and squinted at Muir Island through a pair of binoculars. Beside him, his partner—a

stocky man with a full red beard, approaching middle age—struggled with the paddles to keep the boat as steady as he could.

The thin man's gaze lingered longest on the island's smallest building: a nineteenth-century crofter's cottage, incongruous against the bulk of the hi-tech facility that dwarfed it. When he had seen enough, he lowered the binoculars from his eyes, turned to the bearded man and gave him a curt nod of confirmation. No words were exchanged. No sounds were to be made at all, except when absolutely necessary. They pointed the boat towards a shaded nook at the foot of a low cliff. The bearded man set it on its way with an assured thrust of the paddles, then left it to drift towards its destination, with its two passengers, in silence.

The bearded man opened a black briefcase, rummaged through its contents and produced two black ski masks. He handed one to his partner, and pulled the other one down over his own head. Both men wore nondescript sweaters, faded blue jeans, gloves and boots that they would dump overboard once their mission was over. Reaching into the case again, the bearded man took out a rope and a grappling hook. He began to pay out a length of the rope, running his hands over it to check for knots, his eyes flicking towards the cliff top as he mentally gauged its height. The thin man occupied himself by taking another look at the schematics. He spread them out on his lap, nodding to himself as he matched the outlines of the buildings to the fresh evidence of his own eyes and ran through the details of the plan in his mind. Muir Island was protected by a sophisticated security system, and it worried the man a little that his blueprints were slightly out of date. But no system was impenetrable. Not if you had the right skills and tools for the job. And that cottage was the weak point.

He rolled up the schematics and slipped them back into their cardboard tube, which he tucked beneath his bench,

out of the way. He reached for his laptop computer and booted it up, checking that all the programs he needed were still safe on its drive: programs that could root out and analyze data with phenomenal speed, cracking random combinations and even confounding enemy systems with false data. The men's instructions were that this mission had to be executed in total secrecy. If they set off an alarm, any alarm, then the deal was off.

As the fishing boat nudged against the rocks at last, the thin man took one final look at the target. Her image stared back at him defiantly from the small screen, her eyes alive with Celtic fire. Brown hair tumbled around a face that was still relatively young but careworn. In the picture, she was wearing a yellow and black bodysuit, as if she fancied herself some kind of super-hero. Her lab coat provided a bizarre contrast to the costume. But the thin man and his partner knew all about this woman. The bodysuit, they knew, was to give her freedom of movement, and an element of protection, in combat situations. She may have been an important scientist, but the nature of her work—and of the people with whom she mixed—had earned her some powerful enemies. She had to be prepared.

The thin man smiled a thin-lipped smile of satisfaction, as his bearded partner hurled the grappling hook towards the cliff top and it caught first time. All the preparation in the world wouldn't save Doctor Moira MacTaggert from them.

"No, we haven't heard from Hank in days. Is something wrong?" The speaker, whose image filled the screen of Moira MacTaggert's sophisticated communications console, was called Jean Grey. She was one of Moira's oldest, dearest friends.

"No more than usual," said Moira, with a sigh. "We've hit another brick wall, that's all."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Moira."

"Och, never mind that now," she said dismissively, trying not to show how much she was hurting. "We'll pick

ourselves up and start again, like always. But Hank took it pretty hard this time. When he walked out of here, he was more down than I've ever seen him." "How long has he been gone now?"

"The best part of thirty hours. I'm worried, Jean."

"I'm not surprised. This doesn't sound like the Henry McCoy I know." Jean pursed her lips and frowned thoughtfully.

She had long, curly, red hair and was quite strikingly beautiful-and Moira knew that she possessed the brains and the personality to complement her looks. But Jean Grey was also a mutant, born with a genetic abnormality that marked her as something different-and, in some people's minds, someone to be feared.

In many respects, she was lucky. Her genetic X-factor had manifested itself in the form of mental abilities—telepathy and telekinesis—and her outward appearance did not betray her nature, as it did the natures of many. She could have lived a normal life, at least some of the time—although there would always have been somebody out there, hating her for what she was and threatening to expose her secret. Instead, she had chosen a different path.

She had chosen to pursue a dream.

A long time ago, or so it seemed now, a man called Professor Charles Xavier gathered together a group of five young mutants, whom he christened the X-Men. Jean was one of those original five-as was Moira's current lab partner, the missing Henry McCoy-but many more came after them. Over time, the X-Men grew into an elite mutant cadre, who use their powers to protect a world that often seems to despise them. Their long-term goal is the peaceful integration of their kind into society. For now, however, they are forced to carry out their activities in secret, concealing their identities behind masks and code names.

Jean was wearing her costume at the moment: a body-hugging green bodysuit with a distinctive golden firebird

motif to represent her chosen code name: Phoenix.

"Do you think he might be in trouble?" she asked.

"It crossed my mind," admitted Moira. "But I decided to do a wee bit of poking around with my computer here, just in case. I found Hank's name on an airline passenger list. He left Glasgow last night, changed planes at Newark and took an internal flight up to Boston." "Boston!" repeated Jean, with the light of realization dawning in her green eyes.

"Aye, I thought that might set a few alarm bells ringing."

"He's heard about Newhill, then? About William Montgomery?" "BBC News 24 has been running the story over here."

"It's the funeral this morning," recalled Jean. "You don't think—?" "I think this death is the metaphorical straw that broke the camel's back, Jean. I think it's affected Hank more than he'll admit. And I don't think he should be left alone right now."

Jean nodded in agreement. "I get the message. I'll run a check with Cerebro, just to be sure. If Hank is in Newhill, then we'll get somebody up there right away."

"Thanks, Jean."

Moira broke the connection, and silence descended around her again. She gulped down the last of her coffee, and yawned. She ached all over, and her brain felt fuzzy. She was in no condition, let alone mood, to go back to work now-especially knowing that she would have to start from scratch and find a whole new angle from which to tackle the problem of the Legacy Virus. That was why she had come here, back to her cottage. She needed-and deserved-a few hours' proper sleep, in her own bed. Perhaps, by the time she woke again, there would be some good news about Hank.

She got to her feet, and headed for the stairs.

And, all of a sudden, there was somebody blocking her way. "What-?" she began. But there seemed no point in completing the question. The man was wearing a black ski

mask, and he was pointing a heavy gun in her direction. A footfall sounded behind her, and Moira whirled around to find another man-taller than the first and painfully thin, but also armed and masked-emerging from her kitchen. They were professionals, she knew that. Had they not been, they could not have got within a hundred meters of this building without her security systems telling her about it.

"All right," she said, in as stern a voice as she could muster, "what is this? What's going on here?" Her gaze darted from one gun to the other, her muscles tensing, ready to respond if it looked like one of the intruders was even thinking of firing. Outmatched she might be, but Moira MacTaggart would go down fighting or not at all.

"What's going on, Doctor MacTaggart," said the thin man, in a voice that was calm and measured, and slightly hoarse, "is that we represent some people who wish to speak to you."

"At gunpoint?"

"The guns are a precaution, nothing more. They fire a dart that will deliver a neural shock to your system, causing you to lose control of your bodily functions. It isn't a pleasant experience, but if you stay very still, keep your hands where I can see them and do precisely as you are instructed, then you won't need to find that out for yourself." The thin man produced a small, black device. It resembled a mobile phone, but it only appeared to have one button. He pressed it, and returned the device to his pocket without ever looking at it.

"Who are you working for?" asked Moira. Neither of the two men answered her. "What happens next?" she ventured.

"You will be collected," said the thin man. "But our employers have also asked us to ensure that you bring your files along with you." ■ - - ~

"What files?"

“Please, Doctor MacTaggart, don’t try to play dumb. It doesn’t suit a woman of your obvious intelligence. You have been researching possible cures for the Legacy Virus. You keep hard copies of all your notes, and also back up the data onto rewritable DVDs. The disks will be quite adequate.”

“Oh, will they indeed?”

“I believe you keep them in this house. However, our search has failed to uncover them. I suspect you currently have them about your person.”

“And what makes you so interested in my work?”

“You’ll find out,” said the shorter man, gruffly, speaking for the first time.

The thin man gesticulated impatiently with his gun, and Moira knew the conversation was over. She would get no more out of her captors for now. Perhaps they knew nothing more. Throughout the exchange, she had been watching them, looking for a chance to seize an advantage, to overpower them or simply to run. There hadn’t been one. Their eyes had remained upon her, unblinking. Their guns hadn’t wavered. As she had already noted, they were professionals.

She had no choice. With a sigh of resignation, she reached into her inside coat pocket and produced three DVDs. The bearded man stepped forward, eagerly. Moira’s stomach did a cartwheel as he snatched the precious disks from her. They were only the backup files, she told herself. But what if her unwanted visitors intended to destroy the originals too?

“And now,” said the thin man, with satisfaction, “we wait.”

Six thousand miles away, night had already fallen. In a sumptuously appointed office, the whirring of an overhead fan merged with the muted voices of revelers from the main ballroom at the front of the single-story building. A businessman sat in a plush chair, keeping his expression

carefully neutral as he updated his latest ally on his progress.

"It is already done. The woman is on her way here."

"Are you insane?" The businessman bristled. His ally's voice was so heavily disguised by electronic filters that it sounded positively robotic. Even so, he managed to make his scorn quite audible. Likewise, his features had been digitally altered so that his image on the desktop computer—and to anyone who happened to intercept and unscramble his encrypted transmission—was unrecognizable. This being the case, the businessman wondered sourly why he had bothered to use a video link at all. He knew the answer well enough, though. The picture on the screen was an imposing one, despite—perhaps in part because of—its blacked-out features. His ally's eyes, in contrast to the rest of his face, burnt brightly with contempt. The businessman could see through the facade—he was not above manipulating images in such ways himself—and was determined not to be intimidated. It was no easy task, though. The businessman fancied himself one of the most powerful men on the planet, but he was talking to one of the few beings alive who actually worried him.

"The work was going too slowly," he defended himself. "I took a decision."

"Moira MacTaggart is a close associate of Charles Xavier's. They were lovers!"

"I know that."

"Then you should have appreciated the likely consequences of moving against her. Who do you intend to reveal our plans to next—perhaps Henry McCoy?"

"McCoy has returned to America. I waited until MacTaggart was alone before I acted."

"Do you think it makes a difference? Xavier's children won't rest until they find her."

"I believe it's a risk worth taking. Nobody alive knows as much about this disease as Doctor Moira MacTaggart. She

has been working with it since it was first identified. She was the first baseline human being to contract it. We need her.”

“The X-Men will bring this project down around your ears, you

fool!”

“I daresay you’re right.” The businessman leaned back in his chair, affected a casual pose and returned his ally’s steely glare. “But I’m gambling that, by the time they do, it will have served its purpose. The cure for the Legacy Virus will be in our hands.”



THE LAST good-byes had been said. The family and closest friends of the dead man were casting handfuls of earth upon his coffin.

His mother was weeping. Doctor Henry McCoy was relieved to

think it was almost all over. He wondered again what he was doing here.

There had been a good turnout. William Montgomery would have been gratified to imagine he had so many

friends. But, from his inconspicuous position at the back of the crowd, Hank had overheard the buzz of a dozen muttered conversations. He knew that, despite the efforts of the guards on the gate, few of the onlookers were here for Montgomery's sake. They were here for the spectacle. They were here because they thought it would make them part of a story that had put their small town on the map. They were here because it gave them an opportunity to share their worries and suspicions with like-minded neighbors. Hank had tried not to listen to their ignorant theories about why Montgomery might have died. But he had heard the word 'mutant' mentioned several times, always with distaste.

It made them feel better, of course. To fool themselves into thinking that the young man had somehow brought on his own fate. To convince themselves that it couldn't happen to them.

It was only through the benefit of advanced technology that Hank himself could stand among them, without becoming a target for their unthinking prejudice. He dug his hands into his coat pocket and felt the stubby, metallic shape of the image inducer: the device that was casting a holographic field around him, to make him look like something he wasn't.

Once upon a time, he had been able to pass for human without such help. Well, almost. He had been marked out by his stooped posture, his overdeveloped leg muscles and his oversized feet—but his superhuman strength and acrobatic prowess had compensated somewhat for the stigma that nature had attached to him at random. He had joined the X-Men and christened himself the Beast, as an ironic gesture towards those who had mocked him, but also as a reflection of his own deep fears, that his animal nature might one day subsume him. And he had dedicated himself to the science of genetics. He had studied his own abilities, seeking to understand the genetic mutation that had made him an outcast.

In so doing, he had taken an unwise gamble. He had ingested a serum that hadn't been fully tested. He had unlocked the full potential of his remarkable genes—and, in so doing, he had turned himself into more of a physical freak than ever.

The voices of the crowd grew louder as they shuffled back to the cemetery gates, as if the end of the service had somehow drawn a line under the need for a respectful hush. Hank walked alone, tuning out their bigotry, looking for a way to escape. As soon as he was out on the sidewalk, he thought, he would turn left, walk back to the station and catch a train to the airport. He would leave this place and its troubles behind him.

He should never have come here.

He was halfway to the sidewalk when he realized that something was wrong. A knot of people was marching against the departing crowd, up the gravel path. Their faces were twisted by hatred, and they carried homemade placards daubed with misspelled slogans. Hank didn't need to read them to know what they said. He had lived through this scenario too many times.

The protestors were fighting their way through the onlookers, towards the family, who had stayed behind to share a quiet moment by the graveside. The guards at the gate had been overpowered; they ran after the protestors, shouting angrily, unable to stop them. They were followed by the journalists and the cameramen, seizing this chance to get closer to the action, eager for an incident to report. One presenter ran backwards, speaking breathlessly into a pursuing camera, keeping the rest of the world updated. And the people who had already reached the gates were turning back, realizing that there was suddenly more to see.

The family saw the protestors coming, and read their placards. The younger members of the clan moved to confront the aggressors, their misery boiling over into anger.

Montgomery's mother burst into tears again. A hungry crowd closed in around the battleground, and

Hank found himself pushed to its front. He felt exposed, but he couldn't get away.

"What are you doing here?" spat one of the family members. "We don't want you here!"

"And we don't want your kind in Newhill!" came the spiteful rejoinder.

"What 'kind'? What are you talking about?"

"Mutants!"

"There ain't no stinking muties in our family!"

"Oh yeah? Your brother just died of a mutant disease, didn't he?" The young thug's friends supported him with a roar of agreement. A similar cry went up from some of the spectators. They had been thinking the same thing, and this altercation gave them the chance to vent their fears, to demand answers. A chill ran up Hank's spine. This was going to be ugly. And the presence of the cameras only made things worse. It incited the protestors to go further than they might otherwise have done, to put on a performance.

"If he wasn't a mutie himself, he must've palled around with them!"

"Yeah, he must've been a mutie-lover!"

"Mutie-lover!"

"Your whole family are mutie-lovers!"

"How do we know Montgomery's not gonna come crawling out of his grave, eh? You see it all the time on the news. These muties, they're like super-villains. They never really die, do they? We ought to cut off his head and drive a stake through his heart or something!" "Yeah, stop him coming back."

"Keep him from spreading his filthy mutant plague to our kids!" The insults kept coming, and the denials grew ever more heated. Soon enough, words turned to pushes, and pushes became punches. One of William Montgomery's

brothers grappled with one of the tormentors, and they toppled sideways into the crowd. The onlookers took sides. They aimed kicks and blows. Some tried to quell the violence by singling out the biggest agitators and bearing down upon them, but they only added to it. Others didn't have the nerve to join in, so they shouted encouragement to one side or the other, adding fuel to a fire that was already threatening to burn way out of control. A small number tried to escape, but they found this easier said than done. In the space of a few seconds, a minor skirmish had erupted into a riot.

Hank had seen it all happen a thousand times before.

This was nothing to do with him. He told himself that as he kept his head down, avoided the fists flying around him and looked for a way out. This wasn't his business.

But then, through the chaos, he caught sight of Mrs. Montgomery, sobbing onto the shoulder of the priest who had performed the funeral ceremony. And he wondered how things might have been different had he not wasted so many hours, made so many wrong guesses. If he could have cured the Legacy Virus in time to save this poor woman's son.

He wondered how much of this was his fault.

And, with a sigh, he reached for the image inducer. He hesitated for only a second before he thumbed the switch to deactivate it. And suddenly, the true form of the Beast was revealed.

The reaction was as instantaneous as it was predictable. A collective gasp of horror went up, somebody screamed, and the crowd contracted as the people nearest to Hank struggled to get away from him. One woman fell over, slipped between the cracks in the throng and couldn't get up again. Much as it hurt him, the Beast couldn't blame them for being frightened. A monster had just appeared among them. He remembered how he had felt upon first sight of his own newly mutated form, a lifetime ago. He

remembered staring into a mirror, appalled at his own pointed ears and heavy brow and fangs. These features, combined with the blue fur—blue, of all colors!—which grew over his entire body, gave him the appearance of a malevolent werewolf from a dark fairytale.

His suit had disappeared, and he was clad only in a pair of stretchable trunks beneath his black overcoat, the only part of his disguise that had been real.

He would probably have caused a mass panic if he had stayed here. But that wasn't what he had in mind at all.

The Beast took a standing leap, further into the air than most people alive could have managed. He brought his hands down onto the heads of two startled men who hadn't been able to get away fast enough, using them to support himself as he swung the lower part of his body forward and somersaulted into the center of the fray. Some of the protestors, and some members of the Montgomery family, had been too caught up in fighting to see what was happening around them. They saw now. A blue-furred monster dropped into their midst, and, on a mad impulse, grabbed hold of the most vocal of the antimutant demonstrators and planted a big kiss on his lips. The youth tore himself away, spluttering and spitting, but the Beast's momentary good humor faded at the sight of an elderly lady, who had produced a handkerchief and was breathing through it, her eyes alight with fear for her life. He was distracted, frozen, for less than a second, but it was long enough. Somebody leapt onto his back, scratching at his face and kicking and screaming. The Beast twisted around beneath his assailant, loosened the man's grip and pitched him forward over his shoulders. Two more men rushed him, one from each side. He threw himself backwards, head over heels, and righted himself with a deft handspring as his would-be attackers collided with each other. But more and more people were becoming emboldened, wanting to take out their frustrations, and he couldn't avoid them all. Their

voices merged into a cacophony of hatred as they trampled each other in their haste to reach him. Enemies of a moment before had become allies. “How gratifying,” said the Beast, “to see that you all agree on one thing, at least.”

Somebody had found a stout stick from somewhere. The Beast heard it whistling through the air, and sidestepped a fraction of a second too late. He winced, momentarily staggered, as it cracked against his ribs. The crowd took full advantage of his weakness, and suddenly he found himself beneath a pile of bodies.

This was not going the way he had planned.

He pushed one man away with the butt of his hand, another with his foot. He wriggled out of the way of a second blow from the stick. He pulled one thug down on top of him, using him as a shield and then pushing him into someone else, sending both to the ground. He reined in his anger, knowing he dared not use all his strength. These weren't evil mutants. They were normal human beings, and he didn't want to hurt them no matter how much they provoked him. So the Beast fought defensively, keeping them off-balance and guessing what he would do next, until he managed to open up a gap, and then he went for it.

The rest of the crowd had drawn in around the combatants, thinking themselves safe, baying for the blood of a monster they had thought defeated. They cried out in horror and shrank back as one, as said monster suddenly emerged from the melee and hurtled towards them. They tried to duck as he leapt into the sky, muttering apologies —“Pardon me ... excuse me ... oh, was that your face?”-as he bounded across their heads. And then, at last, he was clear, and the angry crowd streamed after him as he raced for the high railings at the edge of the cemetery. He knew that none of them would be able to follow him, as he cleared the barrier easily and landed on the sidewalk. But some of the mob had second-guessed him, and they were already

spilling out of the gates just down the road and racing towards him.

The Beast ran an easy, loping gait until he was out of sight on a secluded street. He had achieved his objective. He had broken up the fight by giving its participants a common foe. Not that the trouble was over yet, of course. Some of them would not give in so easily. They would keep on looking for him, roaming the streets in gangs. There might be other skirmishes throughout the day—but they would be on a smaller scale, at least, and the police would be able to handle them. And, with luck, they would be far away from William Montgomery's grieving parents and his freshly dug grave.

All the Beast had to do now was remove their target.

He reached into his pocket and produced the image inducer. His face fell at the sight of the dent in its side, and he stared at the device in dismay as he operated it and nothing happened. He remembered the stick that had cracked into his side, and he realized with growing dread that he had nowhere to hide now. He could already hear footsteps and voices approaching.

"Excuse me, mister?"

The Beast whirled, ready for an attack, but the unexpected voice had come from a young girl, no more than about ten years old. She was standing in the small front garden of one of the neat, white, wooden houses, and there was no fear, no hatred, in her face.

"You used to be in the Avengers, didn't you? I saw you on the TV, fighting some scary man with a beard. My mom said you saved all our lives that day. You're a super-hero."

"Bless you," said the Beast, his features breaking into a toothy smile.

And then the angry mob rounded the corner behind him, and he was running again.

Hank! Hank, are you there?

The words bypassed his ears, popping into his head like thoughts, except that he hadn't thought them; it was not his own internal voice that had spoken them. He recognized and welcomed the telepathic presence of an old friend. *I'm here, Jean.* He formed the answer in his mind, knowing that she would hear it. *I'm in a small town called Newhill.*

I know. We're not too far away. Is everything OK down there?

Let's see—how can I put this? The Beast skidded around another corner, and came up short at the sight of a second group of people running towards him. He teleported an emphatic: *No!*

Hold on, Hank. I've got your position, and we're almost there.

Surrounded, the Beast sprang into the air again and landed on top of an orange, new-style Volkswagen Beetle. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he goaded the crowd, as they gathered around him, shouting out their hatred. "I believe it's customary for the lynch-mob to carry pitchforks and flaming torches!"

He performed a desperate dance on the car's roof, leaping over grasping hands and lashing out with his feet to repel anyone who tried to climb up beside him. This kept them at bay for a minute or more, before they started climbing up simultaneously from opposite sides of the vehicle. Then the Beast leapt past them before he could be overwhelmed. He bounced nimbly off the Beetle's curved bonnet, and onto the trunk and then the roof of the next car. One man tried gamely to follow him, but cried out as he fell short and hit the road hard. The Beast had gained another few seconds, as the crowd moved to surround his new perch. But this time, somebody had the bright idea of rocking the car beneath him, and he found it increasingly difficult to keep his balance and avoid his attackers' blows at the same time.

He was hugely relieved, then, to hear a familiar sound over the clamor: the *bamf* of a sudden displacement of air that could only have heralded the arrival by teleportation of one particular X-Man.

If the crowd had thought the Beast a character out of a dark fairytale, then they must have imagined Nightcrawler being birthed in that same evil place~if not somewhere worse. His skin, like the Beast's, was blue-a darker, indigo blue-his fangs and pointed ears were similarly pronounced and, in addition, he sported a long tail with a pointed end. His white-gloved hands and white-booted feet had only three digits each, and his yellow eyes glowed like headlamps. He resembled a shadowy goblin demon. Only the Beast, of those present, knew the gentle, chivalrous, Christian soul that was the real Kurt Wagner.

Nightcrawler seemed to hover in midair above the crowd for an instant, before disappearing in a puff of sulphurous smoke and materializing almost instantly, a few feet to the left. He teleported again and again and again, always before gravity could take hold of him, until it looked like he was almost surrounding the mob by himself. They panicked, as Nightcrawler had no doubt intended, running this way and that, forgetting their prey, confused and perhaps unsure just how many dark allies the Beast had called upon. And then Nightcrawler appeared on the car roof beside his teammate. "Komm mit, mein Freund!" he instructed, lapsing into his native German tongue-and they jumped down onto the road and fled side by side.

They gained a considerable lead before anyone thought to follow them—and even then, their pursuers were neither as numerous nor as enthusiastic as before. "You have my lifelong gratitude, my friend," the Beast panted. "I thought my branta canadensis was well and truly cooked." Nightcrawler grinned at his teammate's typically verbose turn of phrase. "I'm not sure we did much to further the cause of peaceful mutant-human relations, however."

"I've dealt with mobs like that before," said Nightcrawler. "You can't reason with them. If it's any consolation, half of them will be ashamed of themselves after the heat of the moment, when they realize what they've done."

"Which leaves us to worry about the other half."

"As ever, the stoic of our lives. It looks like our lift's arrived." The Beast had already heard the drone of the X-Men's Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird stealth jet overhead. Nightcrawler *bamf*-ed away, taking the most direct route possible up to the airplane. He could have carried his colleague with him if he'd had to, but a tandem teleport would have placed a great deal of stress upon both of them. The Beast was not surprised when, having taken only a few more steps, he sensed somebody swooping down behind him; somebody who wrapped a pair of strong arms around his chest and lifted him bodily off the ground. He recognized the green-gloved hands of Rogue, another teammate, even before she told him to "Hold on, sugar!" in her familiar Southern drawl. The wind whipped through his fur, as his astonished pursuers-along with the town of Newhill, Massachusetts-dropped sharply away beneath him.

Five minutes later, the Beast sat inside the Blackbird with Rogue beside him, Nightcrawler in front and Phoenix at the plane's controls. "Not that I've any wish to look a gift horse in its oral cavity," he said, "but what exactly alerted the X-Men to my predicament?"

"We got a call from Moira," said Rogue. "She was worried about you, up and disappearing like you did." She had removed the hood of her green bodysuit, and shaken loose her shoulder-length brown hair with its distinctive white streak. Even in here, though, she didn't take off her gloves. Her costume covered every inch of her skin, from the neck down. The Beast was well aware of the reason for that. If he was ever tempted to pity himself for the problems that his mutation caused him, then he had only to think of Rogue. She was forever denied contact with other people, knowing

as she did that she only had to brush her skin against theirs to absorb their physical abilities, their thoughts, their very lives.

"Ah, yes," said Hank contritely. "I'm afraid I owe the esteemed Doctor MacTaggart an apology. I haven't paid her much consideration of late."

"It was Moira who worked out where you'd be," explained Phoenix. Gently, she added: "She said you were pretty upset about what happened in Newhill."

The Beast sighed. As the adrenaline rush from his exertions subsided, depression settled back upon him like a heavy shroud. Not every problem in his life could be solved by a last-minute cavalry charge. "You didn't see William Montgomery's parents today, Jeannie. Two more innocent victims in the war between *homo sapiens* and *homo superior*."

"But what possessed you to go to the funeral in the first place?" asked Rogue. "You must have known the locals wouldn't exactly roll out the red carpet for a mutant right now."

"I hardly planned to reveal myself as a member of our beleaguered species." The Beast shrugged. "And, to answer your question as best I can, I don't entirely know why I came here. It was not my intention when I left Muir Island. I acted on instinct. I didn't know for sure that I'd be boarding a flight until I had reached the airport." "Moira told me the work wasn't going too well," Jean prompted sympathetically.

"A polite euphemism, no doubt, for my latest abject failure." "Don't you think you're being a bit hard on yourself?" said Nightcrawler.

"Am I? A man was buried today, Kurt."

"You can't blame yourself for the Legacy Virus!"

"I can blame myself for not stopping it in time. For how long have I been seeking the cure to this damnable disease? How many people have suffered and died for my mistakes? And how many distractions have I allowed myself in the

meantime? I shouldn't even be here. I should be with Moira, working to ensure that nobody else has to lose a son or a daughter, and yet what am I doing? Indulging my own feelings. I didn't come here for William Montgomery's sake, nor for his family's. No, if I were to analyze my own behavior today, I would be forced to conclude that I was looking for a way to expunge my own deep feelings of culpability."

"What have you got to feel guilty about?" protested Rogue.

"The news reports didn't help," recalled Hank, in a distant voice. "Every time I turned on a television set or listened to the radio, I was confronted by evidence of my own shortcomings; a reminder that the Legacy Virus is still spreading. I couldn't save its latest victim. I can't guarantee I'll be able to save the next one."

"You can't think like that," said Nightcrawler. "Legacy isn't the only disease out there, you know. It isn't even one of the most common. People die of cancer every day, but do you blame the doctors who are trying to find a cure?"

"Of course not." The Beast sighed again. "And I know you're right. This is something I'm going to have come to terms with." He leaned back in his seat and barked a short, bitter laugh. "Do you know what the most ironic thing is? While I was down there, surrounded by the rampaging mob, I felt more alive than I have in days. I felt like the bombastic Beast of old. I even found time to dispense a few quips—and not because the situation wasn't perilous, but because my enemy was tangible. I could act against it. I could leap past one of my tormentors, or knock one aside, and see how my actions improved my circumstances. I miss that feeling of accomplishment, that simple chain of cause and effect."

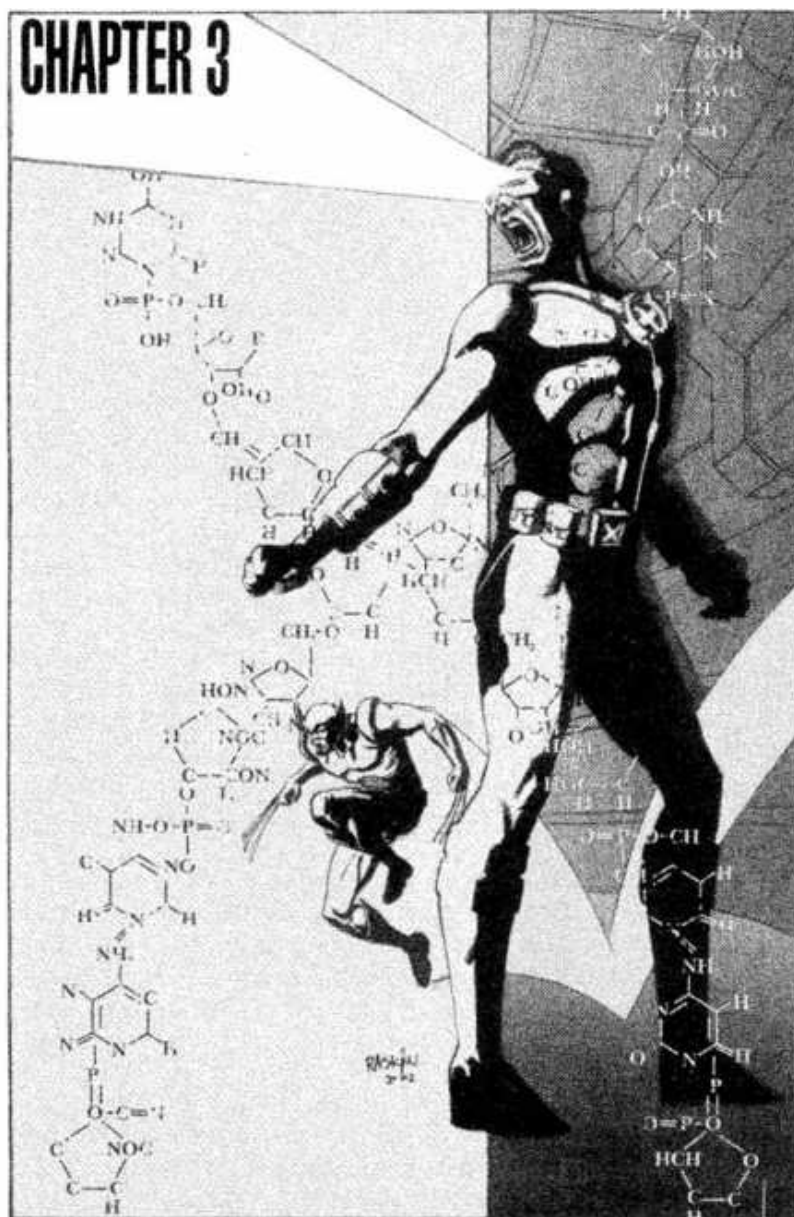
"You blew off some steam," said Rogue. "That's good!"

"Do you think so? Look at me: I pride myself on being a man of words, a man of science—and yet I appear to be most at peace with myself when I can attack a problem with my fists!"

“Sometimes we don’t have a choice,” said Rogue firmly. “Some people won’t listen to reason-especially not those who’d cheerfully see us all dead because of what we are.”

“It’s only natural to feel frustrated,” said Phoenix. “You and Moira have set yourselves an almost impossible task. But I know you, Hank. I know both of you, and I know that, if anyone can cure the Legacy Virus, you can. It’s not in either of your natures to give up.” “I’m gratified by the vote of confidence, Jeannie. And you needn’t fret overmuch on my account. I believe I may have worked the surfeit of negative emotions out of my system for the present. In fact, if you wouldn’t mind turning the Blackbird around, I would very much appreciate a ride back to the Muir Island research facility. I have work to do.”

Jean half-turned towards him, and flashed him a radiant smile. “We’re already on our way. Our ETA is in about one hour and forty-five minutes. I can think of a certain Scottish lady who will be very pleased to see you.”



jjjlt} ALEM CENTER was a small town in Westchester County, New York, just near enough to Manhattan to make commuting feasibly ble, just distant enough to qualify as a peaceful suburb. Its peace, however, would have been shattered had its residents only been aware of what really went on in a certain building at the top end of Graymalkin Lane.

The Xavier Institute for Higher Learning was just far enough away from the town center—and set back far enough into its own grounds—for few people to notice the odd telltale sign of its true nature. And those who did see occasional flashes in the sky, or thought they heard the odd explosion, tended to assume that they were the results of some outlandish experiment being carried out within. They voiced concerns that, one day, Professor Charles Xavier's so-called gifted youngsters would go too far and wipe out the whole town, but they were only words. No one really believed them.

Inside Xavier's school right now, a young man was under attack.

The drones flew at Scott Summers from all sides, the nozzles of their tiny, in-built weapons flashing as their internal systems locked onto him. They were the size of dragonflies, but the shape of slightly flattened spheres, with silver metal plating. They were propelled not by wings but by antigravity systems, which allowed them to stop and turn on a hair.

He waited until they were about to fire, then dived. He passed beneath a cluster of drones, dropped into a crouch, and twisted around to face his attackers again. They had already reacted to his movement, and were swarming towards him in a great silver cloud.

He rolled the fingers of his right hand into a fist, and activated the sensor in the palm of his glove. He opened his golden visor to its fullest extent, and a powerful beam of red energy ripped forth from his eyes and cut through the first rank of drones. They were halted in their tracks, each emitting an almost pathetic *bleep* as it clanged to the floor, a dead weight.

Explosions would have been more satisfying, but also more costly. Each damaged drone would have to be paid for.

Like all of Xavier's students, Scott Summers was far more than he seemed. His mutant power—his optic blasts—had

earned him the code name Cyclops, and he was the original and current field leader of the X-Men. It was a role that often thrust him into fierce combat—which was why the Danger Room existed. This soundproofed, hi-tech training facility lay beneath Xavier's school, and offered the X-Men an environment in which they could hone their combat skills and learn to cope with their unique abilities.

"Hey!" protested Wolverine, Cyclops's Canadian teammate, from across the room. "I thought the object was to take these critters down one at a time. A test of reflexes, you said."

"Just narrowing the odds a little," grunted Cyclops, "that's all. Any objections?"

"Hell, no. 'Bout time you cut loose a bit, if you ask me. Can't be good for a fellow to be so uptight all the time."

*I didn't cut loose. It was a tactical maneuver. I'm perfectly in control."

"Whatever."

Cyclops had downed five drones, but the rest—another fifteen—had split up again, to ensure that he couldn't hit more than one at a time. They learned fast.

He scowled, picked one of them at random and hit it with a narrow, focussed beam of exactly the right strength to trigger its cut-off circuit. But he had no time to bask in the satisfaction of having proved his point. As soon as he had turned his attention to one drone, three more had swooped in behind him. He tried to leap out of their way, but too late. A thin, yellow beam pierced his shoulder, delivering a stinging jolt of electricity. It did no more harm than that—Cyclops knew better than to operate the Danger Room on anything other than its lowest setting when there was no one in the control booth to monitor the session—but he was angry with himself for letting it happen. He had made a mistake, let his emotions influence his actions, and in combat that could have cost him his life.

Control was vital to Scott Summers. Without control, his optic blasts were a deadly danger to everyone around him. They could only be kept in check by a shielding of ruby quartz—the substance from which the lens of his visor was fashioned—or by his own eyelids. When he woke each morning, or during the night, he had to have the discipline to keep his eyes tightly closed until he had found and donned his special ruby quartz glasses.

To judge by his fighting style, however, Wolverine's temperament couldn't have been more different from Cyclops's. The man who was known to his friends only as Logan preferred to cut loose, relying upon his instincts. In battle, he almost resembled the wild animal from which he had taken his own code name. His mutant gene had endowed him with enhanced senses, a remarkable healing factor and three extensible bone claws in the back of each hand. Scientists in his homeland of Canada had added their own double-edged gift: they had grafted adamantium, the hardest known metal, onto his skeleton. And decades of experience—Logan looked forty, but his healing factor had retarded the aging process so that nobody could tell how old he really was—had made him, as he often boasted, the best there was at what he did.

He leapt into action now. He launched himself into the air, a yellow-and-blue-clad ball of hissing fury, and lashed out with his adamantium-laced claws. He had started the exercise with twenty drones, as had Cyclops. Wolverine's drones were golden in color, and programmed to target only him. They were also proofed against his claws, being reinforced with adamantium themselves. Still, a palpable hit would knock them, beeping, to the ground. He had already downed eleven, without—as far as Cyclops had seen—being tagged in return. By the time he hit the floor again, three more drones had been deactivated. He landed nimbly on his feet, and rolled out of the way of the inevitable counterattacks.

His approach was effective, Cyclops couldn't deny that. It had also been the cause of bitter clashes between the two men in the past, when Logan's feral nature had-in his leader's opinion-gotten the better of him. He was unpredictable, and Cyclops didn't like that.

Scott was responsible for the X-Men's welfare-and, when Professor Xavier was away as he was now, that responsibility weighed particularly heavily upon him. He had been placed in charge of his mentor's dream—and he had no intention of letting the Professor down.

The drones were coming at him again, all at once, in a circle around him, maintaining their distance from each other. He gritted his teeth and set his jaw determinedly. He struck out four times with pinpoint accuracy, not one iota of energy wasted. At the last possible second, he ducked again and rolled, gratified to see that some of the drones had fired upon the spot where he had just been, and that two had hit and incapacitated their fellows.

He brought himself up into a crouch, and found himself back to back with his teammate. "Come on, One-Eye," taunted Wolverine, "why not admit that you only scheduled this workout 'cos of what we saw on the TV news?"

"I told you

"Yeah, yeah-and each time you blast one of these critters, you ain't seeing the face of one of them Newhill jerks. Right! What I want to know is, what did McCoy think he was doing, stirring up the ant's nest like that?"

"It wasn't his fault. It looked to me like he only stepped in to help." That wasn't what the news reports had said. They had played to their viewers' paranoid obsessions: mutants hiding among them, waiting to strike. Only the Beast had been featured-the camera crews hadn't been quick enough to catch him after he had fled the cemetery and joined his teammates—but rumors of an army of super-powered reinforcements had been presented as fact.

“Two gangs of mutie-haters tearing lumps out of each other? Fd have gotten myself a com dog, sat back and watched them go at it!” “No you wouldn’t, Logan.” Cyclops snapped his head around and blasted another drone, which had ventured too close to him.

“Doesn’t help none though, does it, getting into a scrap on live TV? As if people need any more convincing that mutants are the cause of all the world’s problems.”

“They’re scared, that’s all.”

“Scared of what they don’t understand.”

“Perhaps, in Newhill, they have cause to be.”

“I don’t see how you can be so damn reasonable!”

Wolverine had been making himself a target, drawing his drones towards him. Now, with a scowl and a flash of metal, he closed the trap, and took out another two. “What, they think the Legacy Virus is a picnic for us? It’s designed to kill mutants, for Christ’s sake. So, how come it’s our fault if a few poor *homo sapiens* get caught in the crossfire?”

Cyclops didn’t answer. Wolverine wasn’t saying anything that he didn’t already know. He had spent most of his life fighting against antimutant prejudice, but the situation never seemed to improve— and Legacy had only made things worse. Scott had been present when Stryfe, himself a mutant from the far future, had unleashed his engineered virus upon the past in retaliation for a lifetime of mistreatment. He had been unable to stop him.

Stiyfe’s intention had been that his mutant kin should be feared and shunned even more than they already were; that they should be treated like lepers. He had been more successful than he could ever have imagined. Even Stryfe hadn’t anticipated that the virus itself would mutate, and begin to attack baseline human beings: those who weren’t mutants.

Stryfe was dead now, but his legacy lived on in places like Newhill, Massachusetts. It threatened to destroy Professor Xavier’s dream. But, most of all, it had exacted a

very personal cost from the X-Men themselves. It had struck closest to home when it had taken the life of Illyana Rasputin, the younger sister of their currently-absent teammate Colossus. Now, Moira MacTaggert was also threatened.

Cyclops shared Wolverine's frustration-and, if the truth were known, he did find some release in loosing his powers and knocking drones out of the sky.

The impromptu training session, however, was interrupted by an insistent electronic chirping. The communications console at the Danger Room's door. Cyclops felt a stab of dismay at being recalled to the real world and its problems so soon, but he controlled it. The silver drones were mounting another attack, but he focussed past them and fired a thin optic beam, which hit the emergency cutoff switch on the wall. Wolverine found himself swinging at empty air as his remaining drones clattered to the floor around him.

Cyclops hurried to the console and took the call, a knot of worry forming in his stomach at the knowledge that it would almost certainly be bad news. Still, a smile played on his lips as the monitor revealed a head-and-shoulders shot of Jean Grey Summers, Scott's wife and the love of his life. He could see from her expression that something was wrong, so he skipped the small talk and got straight to business. "What is it, Jean? Is Hank OK?"

"He's fine," said Phoenix. "We took him back to Muir Island in the Blackbird. It's Moira. There's no sign of her, Scott. She seems to have disappeared into thin air."

Cyclops's mind was already working, racing through a checklist of the X-Men's many enemies who might have a grudge against Moira or who might use her to get at them, and who could pull off a stunt like this.

"You'd better tell me everything," he said.

Phoenix had just recapped the situation for Cyclops, and broken the connection to New York, when she heard the

door of Moira's cottage opening. She sensed the Beast's thought patterns before he had joined his three teammates in the living room, and she knew he had nothing good to report.

"I've been over every inch of the research center with a fine-tooth comb," he said. "I can find nothing damaged or missing, nothing out of place at all. No indication that anybody other than Moira and myself has entered the building in weeks."

Phoenix nodded. His detailed inspection had only confirmed what an earlier quick search had suggested. She had performed a telepathic sweep of Muir Island herself, and knew that its sole inhabitant was not present. At least she could stop fearing the worst now. She knew that Moira had contracted the Legacy Virus, that it was eating away at her on a cellular level—and a dead woman would have no thoughts for her to read. She hadn't voiced her worries, but she knew that Nightcrawler, Rogue and the Beast had shared them.

Moira's boat was still tied to its moorings. Her helicopter still rested on its pad. She hadn't left the island in either—which meant that somebody must have collected her. And the fact that her sophisticated security system had been deactivated suggested that she had left in a hurry. Or, as was beginning to seem likely, been taken against her will.

"It's the same here," said Nightcrawler. "It's like the *Marie Celeste*. I can find nothing to suggest that Moira hasn't just stepped out of the house for a few minutes." Kurt knew the cottage well, having lived here for a time as a member of Excalibur: Britain's own team of mutant heroes, now disbanded. "Except that, if she did, then where is she now?"

"I wonder," said the Beast thoughtfully. He padded across the room to a wooden cabinet, pulled open a drawer and began to rummage through its tidy contents.

“I checked the security logs,” said Phoenix, “There were no incidents recorded in the hours before the system was shut down—but there are some blind spots in the data. I’m running a program to correlate them, but my guess is that somebody fooled the sensors and gained access to this cottage. They must have surprised Moira here.” “The disks!” Hank turned back to the others, and Jean could have sworn that his face had turned a paler shade of blue. “Moira and I always backed up our work onto rewritable DVDs, in case something happened at the research center. She kept them in this drawer.”

“And they aren’t there now?” asked Phoenix.

“But why would somebody want to take them?” asked Rogue.

“To sabotage your work?” suggested Nightcrawler.

The Beast shook his head and began to pace the room, pinching his lower lip. “No, no, I don’t think so. I checked the files at the center. They were all present and correct. If this was sabotage, then our unknown foe would have destroyed them too, if not the center itself.” “It could be a coincidence,” said Rogue. “What if Moira just happened to have the disks with her when she left?”

“It’s possible,” the Beast conceded, nodding thoughtfully to himself. “I suppose we can’t form any solid conclusions at this juncture. If only I had been here ...”

“It’s my guess,” said Nightcrawler, “that our perpetrators waited until you weren’t.”

“Exactly,” said Phoenix. “And, instead of trying to deduce why Moira was kidnapped—if indeed she was—then I think we should ask ourselves how. She was taken by surprise in her own home. There are no signs of a struggle, and she didn’t have time to alert us, even though she has a communications console in this room with a direct line to the X-Men.”

“So either she knew her assailants and welcomed them into her home...” said Nightcrawler.

“Or they landed on Muir Island silently,” concluded Phoenix. “Which rules out an aircraft,” said the Beast, “unless Moira was so engrossed in her work that she didn’t hear its approach-and a would-be intruder would be unwise to gamble upon such a possibility.” “Could she have been taken in by a shape-shifter like Mystique?” asked Rogue.

“Maybe,” said Phoenix, “although Moira has had enough experience with our mutant enemies to be cautious.”

“I would suggest a teleporter,” said Nightcrawler, “but the security sensors were calibrated to detect any sudden displacement of mass.”

“Which they didn’t,” said Phoenix.

“Nevertheless,” said the Beast, “it behooves us to investigate the possibility. With the equipment at the research center, I can conduct a thorough scan for residual energies.”

Phoenix nodded. “OK, Hank, you do that. Kurt, you stay here and help him. Rogue and I will go for a quick flight, and see if we can locate any witnesses.”

“You think somebody might have seen something?” asked Rogue. “Yes,” said Phoenix, “I do. Something like an unfamiliar boat on the sea this afternoon.”

The TV news was still covering the morning’s events in Newhill. Bobby Drake stared morosely into his glass at the warped reflection of his own young, open face and his mousy brown hair, and he tried to tune out the presenter’s voice. He had come into Salem Center to avoid thinking about what had happened. He had spent hours wandering aimlessly around the town’s shops, but had ended up in this bar because he was sick of seeing sensationalistic headlines on the afternoon and early evening editions of newspapers. He had already declined Wolverine’s offer to vent his feelings by joining him and Cyclops in a Danger Room training session. This was one of those days on which he needed to forget that he was a mutant, and specifically the X-Man known to the world as Iceman.

But the television, mounted on a wall bracket above Bobby's head, wouldn't let him forget.

The blue-furred interloper at William Montgomery's funeral had been identified as Doctor Henry McCoy. This news program was more responsible than some: the presenter suggested that Hank had been trying to end the trouble, not cause it. He even reminded his audience of the Beast's one-time role as a member of the Avengers: a UNSanctioned super hero team who enjoyed a degree of regard and even adulation that was denied to their mutant counterparts.

It was too late. Bobby knew that too many minds had been made up already.

To his left, further along the bar, a swarthy man in a lumberjack's shirt and jeans made a less than polite comment about how 'muties' were appearing everywhere.

"Too right," agreed the bartender, operating the pumps. "It's frightening, that's what it is. If a freak like that Beast guy can pass himself off as human, then how're you supposed to tell? There could be half a dozen of them in this bar right now."

To Bobby's surprise, one of the bartender's colleagues—a young woman—came to mutantkind's defense. "Oh, Chuck," she said, rolling her eyes, "if you can't tell the difference, then what's the problem? They've got to drink somewhere!"

"Problem is," said the male bartender, "they're worming their way into decent society, that's what the problem is."

"We already know how they're planning to replace us," said the swarthy customer. "They should be rounded up and put into camps, where we can keep an eye on them."

"Or at least sent back to their own country. That... that Genosha, whatever it's called."

Bobby scowled, and told himself not to get involved. He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on his glass, accidentally lowering the temperature of his beer by a couple of degrees.

It was like this all over the country, the television assured him. Longstanding fears had been inflamed. People were looking at their neighbors, talking behind their backs, wondering if they might conceal a dangerous secret. Wondering if they might be hiding and watching, and biding their time. There had already been four reported attacks against suspected mutants. One was dead, another injured. As yet, there was no evidence that any of the four possessed the mutant X-factor, although one had been found to be infected with the Legacy Virus.

The newsreader moved on to another story, and Bobby listened to it, because the conversation to his left hadn't finished and he didn't want to hear any more ignorant comments. The gist of the item was that a Mrs. Scott from upstate was making a fresh appeal to the public for sightings of her husband, a prominent biochemist who had been missing for three weeks. He had been carrying out research into the genetic modification of crops, and it was speculated that his disappearance might have something to do with anti-GM protestors.

"If they've got nothing to hide," asserted the swarthy customer, his voice rising as he swilled down his beer, "then why'd they kick up such a fuss about the Mutant Registration Act? Why object to letting our democratically elected government know who they are and what they can do?"

Bobby left his glass half-full, and walked out of the bar before he lost his temper and said something unwise. The evening was beginning to draw in, and he hadn't brought a coat, but the cold didn't affect him. He stuck his hands into his pockets and trudged back towards the school, his shoulders stooped.

He couldn't help wondering how the people of Salem Center would react if they knew that some of their suspicions were well-founded: that mutants really did live among them, and that they really did disguise their true

natures in public and hold clandestine meetings at their top secret base, in which they formulated battle plans.

Sometimes, Bobby Drake just wanted to be normal.

Sure, his powers could come in handy. Iceman could do some pretty cool stuff: form ice and snow out of the very air, even skate from A to B on a self-created ice slide. And he was lucky: in battle, he surrounded himself with a tough shell of ice, but, when he was in civvies, there were no visible signs of his mutant powers. Unlike poor Hank or Kurt, he didn't need an image inducer to be able to hide in a crowd. His earliest days with the original X-Men-he had been their youngest member-had been some of the happiest in his life. But things hadn't seemed so bad in those days. The world hadn't seemed so hostile.

Being a mutant had never been easy-but there had been a time when Bobby had been able to get away from it all, at least for short spells. He had taken several leaves of absence from the X-Men, spent time with his family, dated girls and gone to college. He had even enjoyed a degree of public acclaim as a member of a Los Angeles-based super-group called the Champions. Perhaps he had just been na'ive, he thought now. Perhaps he had been blind to the tensions that had been building up around him even then.

It was harder, nowadays, to forget that he was different. Harder to escape the reminders. Harder to ignore the fact that mutants had many enemies, some of whom had ways of finding them and attacking without warning.

Bobby had recently learned that, as Iceman, he had the potential to become one of the most powerful mutants yet born. He had been accused of squandering that potential. But he had no wish to devote his entire life to being the best mutant he could be. He wasn't Wolverine. He wasn't even Cyclops. He still wanted a normal life, outside of all this.

He wondered how long it would be before the choice was taken from him altogether.

It was with a heavy heart, then, that he entered the mansion home of the Xavier Institute, to be greeted by a worried-looking Cyclops and the fateful words: "We've got a situation." He listened with mounting despair as the X-Men's leader filled him in, and he wondered if his life would ever be his own again.

Scott, it transpired, had spent the last few hours with Wolverine and another teammate, Storm, compiling a list of likely suspects for the probable kidnapping of Moira MacTaggert. With nothing else to go on, they were working on the assumption that one of the X-Men's many enemies had chosen to get at them through their human friend. Bobby felt a pang of guilt when he realized that he was hardly listening to the details. It wasn't until they were halfway to the conference room that he suddenly stopped, and allowed a half-remembered fragment of a television news broadcast to resurface in his mind. "What if," he proposed tentatively, "this was nothing to do with us? What if somebody wanted Moira for her skills?"

Cyclops gave him an inquisitive look. "We've considered that possibility, of course. What makes you say that?"

"Because," said Bobby-and, to his own surprise, he grinned-"Doctor Moira MacTaggert isn't the only scientist specializing in genetic research to have disappeared recently."

The old fisherman in the homely dockside tavern was reluctant to talk to them at first.

Jean Grey smiled at him sweetly, and bought him another halfpint of mild-whatever that was. In return, he mumbled into his graying beard about the state of the fishing industry nowadays, what with EEC quotas and the Eastern European factory trawlers. Rogue felt quite sorry for him, as he talked about a way of life that was gone forever. But she became gradually less sympathetic as he continued to talk and talk, without answering the questions that her teammate gently put to him.

They had borrowed some of Moira's clothes, and donned them over their costumes, before flying under their own power to the nearest population center to Muir Island: Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. They had started at the harbor, asking questions of one person after another. It hadn't taken long for one woman to remember that, looking out to sea, she had seen a large aircraft coming in to land at about half past one. She didn't know where it had put down exactly, but she had seen it again, flying in the opposite direction, about fifteen minutes later.

"Looks like it was a plane after all, then," Rogue had said.

But Phoenix had disagreed. "Like Hank said, too noisy. Somebody might well have flown to Muir Island to collect Moira, but I'm betting she was already a prisoner by then."

It had taken another two hours after that—until Rogue was about ready to give up—before they had found another lead, which had brought them here.

At last, the fisherman confirmed what had already been suggested to the two women by a witness. But not before explaining that he lived off a meager state pension these days, taking out his old boat only when the pain of his gout and arthritis subsided enough to make such an undertaking feasible. There was no living to be made at his game any more. That was why (and he was getting to the point at last now), when he had been made a generous offer this afternoon, he had taken it. He had hired out the *Sea Tiger* to a pair of strangers. They had returned it a couple of hours later, and the old man had thought no more about it.

Finally, Rogue thought, they were getting somewhere.

Except that the fisherman refused to say anything more about his customers. They had sworn him to secrecy.

Jean didn't seem to mind. She smiled again, thanked the old man and bought him another drink, then ushered Rogue out of the tavern. With the coming of night, a bitter chill had descended upon this part of the island. Despite her near-

invulnerable skin and two layers of clothing, Rogue shivered as a fierce sea wind whipped against her face.

"Tell me that wasn't a complete waste of our time," she said. "Tell me you read his mind!"

Jean smiled knowingly. "Our suspects had Scottish accents," she said.

"Locals, then."

"Let's hope so. They certainly didn't leave in the plane with Moira. But they were very careful not to let anything slip. I've been through every word they said to our man in there. They gave him names, but they didn't produce any forms of identification. They were almost certainly using pseudonyms-and they didn't say a thing that might help us find out who they really are or where they came from."

"If only *he'd* been so secretive," said Rogue, wryly. "Couldn't you have rooted out this information an hour ago, before we had to sit through the story of his life?"

"I don't like to invade people's privacy unless I have to," said Jean. "Anyway, I spent quite some time in our fisherman friend's mind during the course of our conversation."

"Oh?"

"He might not know the kidnappers' names, but he did see their faces. The images are still very clear in his memory. I was studying them, memorizing every detail. I think I can safely say that, if I were to see them now, I'd recognize them."

"So, what do we do next? Look at mug shots?"

"In a way," said Jean. "Tomorrow morning, we'll take a ferry to Ullapool on the mainland. It's the only way the kidnappers could have arrived on, and left, the island—and somebody at the terminal must have seen them. I can scan a few minds, and look for images that match the ones in here." She pointed to her own head.

"You're planning to follow them all the way across Scotland like that?" Rogue was incredulous. "Won't that be a

bit like looking for a needle in a veiy big haystack?"

"Not necessarily. If they were in a private car, then a worker at the terminal will have spotted it, and might remember the registration number subconsciously, even if they think they don't. If the kidnappers used public transport, they'll have left an even clearer trail in the memories of ticket clerks, bus drivers and regular commuters." "Are you gonna describe these fellows to me then?" asked Rogue. "Since it looks like we'll be catching up to them pretty soon, and all." "I can do better than that," said Jean. "I can place a picture of them into your mind-and in Hank's and Kurt's too, when we get back to Muir."

Rogue grinned. "These guys sure didn't know what they were getting themselves into when they messed with a friend of the X-Men, did they?"

"OK, people, change of plan."

Cyclops was standing in the Xavier Institute's main conference room, stooped over the head of an oblong table, his gloved knuckles resting on its oaken top. Three other X-Men were present. Wolverine leaned back in his chair, champing on a foul-smelling cigar and glaring at his team leader as if ready to question his every utterance. Iceman had changed into his costume, which, at present, consisted simply of a pair of black trunks with a large red X sewn into the yellow waistband. Having most of his skin exposed helped him to use his powers more effectively, apparently-and he didn't feel the cold. If the X-Men went into action, then Bobby would shift into his armored ice form, anyway.

Rounding out the quartet was Ororo Munroe, better known as Storm. Before joining the X-Men, she had been worshipped as a goddess in the rainforests of her native Kenya-and, when she wielded her ability to control weather patterns, it was easy to see why. Storm was tall and elegant, with dark brown skin and long, white hair, which she kept off her forehead with a black headband. To see her hovering serenely in the midst of a gale of her own creation, her

black cloak billowing around her as she brought down lightning bolts to smite her foes, was like looking at a raw force of nature.

"Thanks to Bobby," said Cyclops, "we now have a lead. We've been searching through archived news stories on the web, and we've learned that Moira is only one of at least four accomplished geneticists to have vanished in the last few months."

"The disappearances were each weeks apart," said Iceman, "and in different countries, which is probably why no one's thought to connect them before."

"And of course," said Cyclops, "no one else knows about Moira yet." He handed out color printouts of downloaded photographs. "A Doctor Takamoto from Tokyo was reported missing first. She's been gone for almost four months now, and the Japanese police have found no leads at all. They've begun to work on the assumption that she's dropped out of sight on purpose. The older gentleman is a Professor Travers from London. But the nearest victim is also the most recent. His name is Clyde Scott, and he lives right here in New York, up in Poughkeepsie."

"I saw his wife on the TV news this evening," said Iceman, as the others inspected a picture of a middle-aged, African-American man with cropped, graying hair.

"So," said Storm, "we are now working on the assumption that Moira was kidnapped, like these other people, because somebody needed her specialist knowledge."

"Precisely," said Cyclops, "which unfortunately widens the field of suspects somewhat."

"What's the plan then, boss?" Wolverine asked.

"I think we should pay a call on Mrs. Scott tomorrow."



E KNOW who you are.

Allan Coleman started, jerking his head up from the puddle of stale beer on the bar top. He looked behind him,

over first one shoulder and then the other, searching for the woman who had spoken. He saw nobody. Nobody who was interested in him, anyway. *Oh man, he thought, it's much too early in the night to be this smashed already!*

Come to think of it, he had no idea what time it was.

He contemplated his near-empty glass, then shrugged his shoulders, swigged down the last of his bitter to steady his nerves, and counted the loose change in his threadbare pockets, wondering if he could scrape together enough to order a chaser with the next pint. Business hadn't been good lately. With many of his associates enjoying extended holidays at Her Majesty's pleasure, the flow of merchandise had slowed to a trickle.

Allan looked around the seedy bar again, reminding himself of the surroundings in which he had settled into an alcoholic stupor, who knew how long ago. He frowned at the unexpected sight of a beautiful woman, sitting at the bar, three stools along. He rubbed his eyes and squinted, trying to focus. Was he seeing things, as well as hearing voices?

The gorgeous redhead certainly looked out of place among the White Lamb's usual Friday night collection of thugs and tramps. Allan rummaged through his change again, this time to see if he could afford to buy her a drink. It would be a hopeless gesture, he was sure, but Allan Coleman was nothing if not a hopeless, even mindless, optimist.

He levered himself up from his stool, wondering why he hadn't remembered that the floor was so far down and that it sloped at such a treacherous angle. He leaned against the bar to support himself, let out a controlled breath, and set his sights upon his prey.

We know who you are, Allan Coleman, and we know where you live.

This time, he let out a strangulated cry of fear. His head thrashed about wildly as he tried to find the source of the

mysterious voice, but it was beginning to penetrate even his pickled brain that there *was* no source; that the voice was contained within his own mind.

"Who are you?" he cried, aloud, staring up at the nicotine-yellowed ceiling. "What do you want with me?" He attracted a few looks, but no one was really interested in, nor cared about, his unseemly outburst. They were used to such behavior in here. From Allan, more than most.

Oh, I think you know the answer to that.

"No ... no, it can't be ..."

What are you most afraid of, Allan? What keeps you awake at night?

"M-m-mutants! They've come for me! They've come for me!"

Remember the girl in the hardware store, Allan?

Remember how she accidentally used her power in front of you: her harmless little ability, to create a small pyrotechnic display with her fingers? Remember what you did to her, Allan?

Allan Coleman tried to bury his head in his hands, to block out the terrible voice, but it didn't work. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he was on his knees, and he realized he must have been shouting, begging for help. But people were no longer ignoring him; they were shaking their heads and moving slowly away from this gibbering madman.

The next thing Allan knew, he was being hoisted to his feet by Roger, the landlord, who was coming out with all the usual admonishments: he'd had enough to drink now, he was upsetting the other customers. Allan tried to resist, but he wasn't strong enough, and his terrified appeals went unheeded as he was propelled toward and through the doors.

He hit the pavement running, wanting to put as much distance between him and the public house as possible, knowing in his heart that it would make no difference. But

the cold Edinburgh night acted like a slap to his face. As Allan came to an exhausted halt, bent double and wheezing in the shadow of the city's famous hilltop castle, he began to sober up. He began to realize that Roger had been right, that he had let the drink play games with his mind, that he had experienced nothing more than a half-waking dream. He felt foolish, but the feeling was nothing compared to the relief that washed over him. He laughed giddily, chiding himself for having believed such an unlikely fantasy, even for a moment.

Presently, Allan straightened up again, adjusted his twisted jacket and used his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his forehead. He swore never to touch an alcoholic drink again, as he did at least once every week.

And, just as he was about to set off for home-for his cramped, untidy and over-expensive third-floor flat-he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder.

Allan turned, and gasped to find himself face-to-face with a blue-skinned demon.

"Guten tag," said the nightmarish creature, its fangs bared, its luminous yellow eyes boring into his skull.

And then there was a ferocious *bamf!* of imploding air, and a sickly wrenching feeling in Allan Coleman's stomach, as Princess Street disappeared in a cloud of evil-smelling smoke.

Mrs. Pearl Scott had become used to receiving unannounced visitors over the past three weeks. Ever since she had reported her husband missing—ever since the fateful day when he had apparently left his Long Island laboratory as usual, but hadn't come home-she had answered the door to a steady stream of policemen, journalists and men in dark suits from various government agencies known only by their initials. At first, her heart had leapt at each new chime of the doorbell. She had raced through the hallway wondering if this was the one, the visitor who would tell her that they had finally found her

husband. She had hoped for good news, but steeled herself for bad.

She didn't feel that anticipation any more. She had been disappointed too many times.

What Pearl hadn't got used to yet was the empty space in her bed, and the feeling of waking up in the morning alone, of going through the motions of life—sending her son off to school, reassuring him that Daddy was safe and well when she didn't believe it herself—even as fear gnawed its way through her stomach.

At least, if Clyde had died, she could have begun to accept her loss. This uncertainty was agony. She didn't know how to feel, what to prepare herself for.

There was something different about today's visitors.

It wasn't the couple's appearance that alerted her. Well, not really. The woman was of African descent, like herself, but younger, slimmer and taller, her hair a beautiful but unusual white. The man looked every inch the FBI agent he claimed to be, with his black suit and grim expression—but his red eyeglasses made for an odd fashion statement.

It wasn't anything they said, nor anything about the FBI passes they showed. Pearl had seen a lot of official cards and bits of paper recently, but how was she supposed to know if they were faked or not? How was she supposed to know what an FBI pass was supposed to look like, other than from brief glimpses on *The X-Files*?

No, it was nothing like that. Just a tingling sensation at the base of Pearl Scott's skull, as she let Agents Summers and Munroe into her house. An instinct, nothing more. A suspicion with no grounds in fact. But a powerful suspicion, nonetheless.

Could it be *them* at last?

The thought made her afraid, but hopeful at the same time. As the agents sat side by side on her sofa, she questioned them gently. She pointed out that she had already spoken to the FBI, and Summers smoothly explained

that, in view of the lack of progress so far, the case had been handed to another department, but he didn't say which one.

"We'd just like to go through your statement again," he said.

"I've told you what happened a thousand times," said Pearl.

"Nevertheless," said Agent Munroe with an encouraging smile, "it might help to bring to mind a fresh detail, something you might have forgotten."

"Don't you think I've wracked my brains trying to think of something? I've got nothing new to tell you!" Archly, she added: "And you never take much notice of what I say, anyhow."

"I know it must be difficult for you, Mrs. Scott," said the young man, "but it really would be helpful to us if you could just go through it all one more time."

Pearl offered to make a cup of tea, then. In fact, she insisted, even when the agents indicated that they really weren't thirsty and would rather get down to business. She wanted to get away from them, to spend a few minutes in the safety of her kitchen, to think.

Almost mechanically, she lit a ring on the gas stove and filled the big old kettle, which, to Clyde's frustration, she had always refused to replace. And she wondered: what were *they* doing here? What had *they* done to her husband, and what did *they* want with her now?

She was drawn back down the hallway, to the door of the living room, and she pressed her ear up against the wood. She could hear

her visitors talking, their voices unintelligible at first but a few words and phrases becoming recognizable as she strained to make them out. .. pity Jean isn't here. She could just..."

"... gone through so much already... seems such a shame ... lying to her..

.. exactly tell the truth, can ... both know how paranoid people can be ...”

.. think she suspects, Scott?”

The hammering of Pearl Scott’s heart, and the sound of her own heavy breathing in her ears, prevented her from hearing more. But she was sure now. She had always been sure, she realized. She had told the police, the special agents, the press, all about *them*, and no one had believed her. But she had always known she was right, and that *they* would come back.

Breathlessly, expecting to hear *them* behind her at any second, she tiptoed up the stairs and into the bedroom, the creaking floorboards seeming louder than they ever had before as she hurried to her husband’s bedside cabinet, opened the bottom drawer and retrieved the gun from beneath his vests. She held it in her hand and looked at it numbly. It was heavier than she remembered. She had thought it would give her a sense of security, but it felt like a dead weight in her hand, and she was more frightened than ever because its solid presence made all this feel more real somehow. Her hands began to tremble, and she dropped the bullets three times as she tried to load them. By the time she reached the top of the stairs again, at last, the handle of the gun was threatening to slide out of her sweat-slickened hand, and the old kettle in the kitchen was whistling insistently.

She was glad for the noise at first, because it masked her footsteps, but she couldn’t have been thinking straight because it hadn’t occurred to her that *they* would hear it too.

The man emerged from the living room first. His face showed only concern but, with his eyes masked by red lenses, Pearl couldn’t judge if it was genuine or not. He looked up to where she had frozen, halfway down the stairs, and he smiled when he saw her. “Mrs. Scott. I was worried that something was wrong. I think your kettle’s boiling.”

He saw the gun, then, before she could think of hiding it. He tried not to react, but he was taken by surprise and couldn't stop himself. He cocked his head, just a little, to one side—an inquisitive gesture— and Pearl could almost feel his hidden eyes boring into her. “Mrs. Scott,” he said softly, gently, “what do you need the gun for?”

His words must have alerted his white-haired companion, because she appeared beside him in the doorway. Almost involuntarily, Pearl retreated a step. The gun felt heavier than ever, but she dragged it up to point at them, squinting along the sights but unable to keep them steady. A trickle of sweat dripped into her eye. “You— you won't take me like you did my Clyde,” she stammered, her throat dry. “You won't! I'll kill you first!”

“Mrs. Scott,” said the man, in the same level, conciliatory tone, “I assure you, we didn't take your husband. We only want to find him.”

“You lied to me. *They* sent you, I know *they* sent you.”

The man and the woman exchanged glances.

“You aren't from the FBI. Deny it! I dare you to deny it!”

“You're right, Mrs. Scott,” said the woman. “We aren't from the FBI.”

“But we don't mean you any harm,” said the man. “We do want to help.”

Pearl didn't know what to do, whether to believe him, and she was shaking so much that she couldn't have hit either one of the strangers with a bullet if she'd tried. She was no threat to *them*, she knew that—but in that case, why didn't *they* do something? Why didn't *they* attack her, disarm her, do whatever *they* had come here for? Could she have been wrong? She was so confused, and she only wanted to put down the gun and cry, give vent to the dreadful feelings that had built up inside her over these past long weeks, but she didn't dare, so she gave voice instead to the words that were burning in her breast: “I know what you are.”

And all the woman said was: "What do you think we are, Mrs. Scott?"

"You're *mutants*," sobbed Pearl, and she burst into tears. "You're *mutants*'. *Mutants*'."

Allan Coleman wanted to be sick.

He didn't know how the demon had brought him here, to this dark alley where nobody would be able to hear his cries, but he felt as if it had turned his guts inside-out in the process. He tried not to think about the churning in his stomach. He was facing a brick wall, with a rusted fire escape ladder, which led only to a boarded-up window. There was only one way out: he could hear the faint sounds of traffic behind him. The demon had vanished—not in a puff of smoke this time, but simply melting into the shadows—and Allan made to run.

But, as he turned around to face the distant road, he found another monster behind him.

This second creature was blue too, but this one had fur. It squatted on top of a dustbin, looking like a wild animal in humanoid form. And it smiled at him.

He gave a yelp of fear, and shrank away from it—then, realizing that his only hope was to do the opposite, to get past it, he galvanized his jelly legs into action and propelled himself forwards. The creature leapt from its perch, too late. For a blissful, hopeful moment, Allan thought he had outrun it—until something blue passed over his head, and the creature landed in front of him, still smiling.

"Not intending to leave our company already, I hope, Mr. Coleman?" it said, in a voice that was surprisingly cultured.

"What do you want with me?" Allan stammered.

"I'm sure it's not like you to make hasty judgements based on cosmetic appearances," the creature continued, as if he hadn't spoken. "I have to say, I would be extremely perturbed if I considered for a moment that you were a man capable of such unreasoning prejudice."

“I’m not prejudiced, I swear I’m not. I’ve got nothing against mutants, honest!”

“In which case, sugar,” came a broad Southern American drawl from behind him, “you won’t mind doing us a small favor, will you?” Allan whirled around, to find a woman behind him. He had no idea where she had come from. She had either teleported in like the blue demon, or dropped from the sky. She was wearing a green bodysuit with a hood, which cast her face into shadow. She looked normal enough at first glance, but she had to be one of them too.

Allan backed away across the cobblestones of the alleyway, looking wildly from the animal-thing to the witch-woman and back, scared to take his eyes off either of them, until he felt cold brick behind him. ‘Boo!’ said a voice in his ear—the voice of the blue demon, although he couldn’t see it—and Allan actually screamed.

Don’t worry, Allan Coleman. We aren’t going to hurt you. Not if you help us.

It was the voice from before. The one in his head. A woman’s voice, he now realized for the first time. And, this time, an image came with it. The redhead. The one who had been seated along the bar, not looking at him. She was looking now. He could see her face in his thoughts, and she was smiling at him. She looked kind and trustworthy. He wanted to believe her, but he was frightened. Frightened of the demon and the creature and the witch, but more frightened still of this woman who could disguise herself as a normal human being, who could infiltrate his local pub, his world, his mind, without him even knowing it.

“What do you want with me?” he asked again, pathetically.

And, this time, she told him.

As Allan Coleman’s hurried footsteps receded into the distance, Phoenix stepped off the roof of the old warehouse building, onto which she had levitated herself after leaving the White Lamb pub. As she lowered herself into the

alleyway, Nightcrawler emerged from the shadows beneath her to join the Beast and Rogue. He seemed to be in good health, which was a relief. Jean knew that teleporting with another person was a strain for him, although his endurance had improved with practice.

The Beast sighed heavily. "Chalk up one more example of *homo sapiens* who will never regard a mutant with anything less than mistrust again."

"According to Jeannie," said Rogue, "he never did anyway."

"Rogue's right, Hank," said Phoenix, as she landed beside her teammates. "I don't like using scare tactics, but Mr. Coleman's mind was well and truly closed already. And if you knew some of the things he'd done..." She shook her head, trying to clear it of the images she had seen in the unpleasant little man's memories. "Anyway, the point is, we didn't have time to be subtle. Moira could be in danger at this very moment, and our trail had gone cold."

It had been a long, exhausting day for the X-Men's resident telepath. It hadn't been too difficult to trace Moira's kidnappers back from the ferry terminal at Ullapool, via a bus ride and a train ride, to Edinburgh's Waverley Station. But, in the bustle of Scotland's capital city, she had had her work cut out for her detecting even the most fleeting memories of the two men's faces in the crowd. She had found a couple of people who had seen them on the street, and some more who had spotted one or other of them in shops. It was enough to confirm that the men almost certainly lived locally, but it didn't tell her where.

Then, at last, she had found somebody who frequented a particular rundown, back-street drinking establishment, and had seen her targets there on several occasions. Many of the White Lamb's patrons remembered them too, although Phoenix had been disappointed to learn that nobody knew much about them. They knew what the men did, but they

didn't know their names. As she had noted back in Stornoway, they were good at keeping their secrets.

She had waited in the pub for a while, almost choking on the ever-present haze of cigarette smoke, hoping she might be fortunate enough for the men to show themselves there tonight. When they hadn't turned up, she had formulated an alternative plan.

"Well, let's just hope our Mr. Coleman can heat things up for us,"

Rogue muttered. "From the look on his face, I think he might just skip town and never come back."

"He won't," said Phoenix, confidently. "He's scared of our marks, but not nearly as scared as he is of us now. He doesn't doubt for a second that we could find him, wherever he hid."

"Besides," grinned Nightcrawler, "we got the telephone number off him."

"Nevertheless," said the Beast, "we stand a better chance of luring our friendly neighborhood guns-for-hire to a rendezvous if the initial contact is made by somebody whose voice they recognize, and whom they trust."

Phoenix "listened" with her mind for a moment. Allan Coleman was still nearby, and she was familiar enough with his thought patterns now to pick them out of a crowd. She smiled. "He's in a public call box," she reported. "He's dialing the number. With a little luck, we can look forward to meeting Moira's kidnappers within the next hour or two."

Scott Summers and Ororo Munroe sat in Pearl Scott's living room and sipped at hot tea from delicate china cups with saucers. It seemed odd, Scott reflected, as he reached for an oatmeal cookie, that the woman had gone from threatening them with a gun to offering them such hospitality in the space of only a few minutes. But then, Mrs. Scott had been confused and upset and, after making her announcement on the stairs, she had simply buried her head in her hands and sobbed. When Scott had approached

her and carefully taken the gun from her, she had acquiesced without a struggle. And, upon realizing that he and his colleague really did mean her no harm-that, indeed, they meant to find her husband, along with their own missing friend-she had been relieved and almost pathetically grateful.

This still left the question of how she had guessed that her two visitors were mutants, but Scott thought it best not to pry too deeply. Perhaps it was just women's intuition. Perhaps it was paranoia: Pearl Scott had expected mutants to come and, by pure coincidence, had chosen today to believe it had happened. But it wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that she might be a mutant herself, albeit not a strong one; that her power might simply be to sense when other mutants were in the vicinity. If so, it was probably best she didn't know about it. Scott knew of far too many people who would do anything to get their hands on somebody with such a power, and Pearl Scott deserved to live a normal life.

She was still a little flustered. She had apologized repeatedly for what she had done, and Scott and Ororo had repeatedly assured her that it didn't matter. "It's not that I'm against mutants or anything," she explained, "goodness, no. My husband, Clyde, was-is-a geneticist. He explained it all to me, and... and, well, hating somebody because they were born with a... a ... twist in a DNA strand, it's about as sensible as hating somebody because they're ... they're ... well, because they were bom with dark skin, isn't it?"

Ororo smiled encouragingly.

"But there are ... I mean, you know, there are ... evil mutants out there, aren't there?" Mrs. Scott spoke hesitantly, looking at her two visitors to see if she had offended them. When she saw that she hadn't, she continued, a little emboldened: "I mean, people like that Magneto one, and ... and ... what was he called? Onslaught." Scott resisted the urge to wince at that particular name. "I mean, it's not that... well, they're ... *you 're* the same as the

rest of us, aren't you? Some good, some bad, some in between."

"And you believe your husband's disappearance may have had something to do with mutants?" asked Ororo.

"There's been no mention of it in the news reports," Scott pointed out.

Mrs. Scott's eyes flashed with a mutinous fire, which hadn't been there before. "No. No, well there wouldn't be, would there? It's a cover-up!"

In Scott's opinion, that wasn't very likely. Typically, the media were all too quick to jump at the merest suggestion of mutant involvement in something like this. However, he kept his own counsel for now, as Ororo questioned their witness further.

After some coaxing—and after making it clear, three times, that she didn't know anything for sure, she only had suspicions—Pearl told them her story. She told them about the day, just a week before her husband's disappearance, when two men in dark suits had come to the house and insisted upon talking to him, even though he had been busy. Mrs. Scott hadn't heard their conversation herself, as the three men had gone into the living room and closed the door behind them—but her Clyde had related the salient points to her later.

"They wanted to hire him, freelance like, to do some work for them. I didn't really understand the details, but it was something to do with mutants ... with studying mutants' DNA and working on some... some ... well, I don't know what it was. But Clyde said they were very insistent. And he couldn't help them; he was in the middle of a project for the government—but when he told them this, they started asking all kinds of questions. Was he prejudiced against mutants? Did he think they didn't deserve his help? That kind of thing. I mean, my Clyde, he didn't—*doesn't*—have a prejudiced bone in his body. He just couldn't help them, that's all, but they took it really badly, and they... well, they

didn't get nasty exactly, but I remember Clyde saying ... he said he didn't much care for their attitude. Like they didn't want to take 'no' for an answer, you know what I mean?"

Ororo nodded, understandingly. "Do you know who these two men were, Mrs. Scott?"

Scott chipped in: "Do you have any reason to believe they were mutants themselves?"

"Oh, no, no, no," Mrs. Scott assured them, "nothing like that. No, no, I think they were normal... well, I mean ... they weren't mutants. Not that I'd know. They didn't *seem* like mutants. It's just that they talked about mutants, you know? And they did say their names, but I can't remember them. I wish I could. But I do know who sent them."

"You do?" Scott raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, well, that's the problem, isn't it? I've told the police, I've told the FBI, I even told a nice young gentleman from the TV news. But, as soon as I say the name, as soon as I mention that... that organization, they just look at me as if I'm stupid. They say I'm being paranoid, that these are respectable people and they'd never do anything like kidnap my Clyde, and I keep thinking, perhaps they're right. But I just keep coming back to it in my mind, and ... well, all I know is, I didn't trust those men. And nor did my husband."

"We don't think you're being paranoid, Mrs. Scott," said Ororo. Pearl Scott looked hopeful, but she was still nervous, still fidgeting with her hands and talking quickly.

"Sometimes I think it's a big conspiracy, you know. It feels like they've got friends everywhere, like you can't say anything against them because they're too powerful, and part of me knows that's stupid, like it's something off the TV, but it's how it feels."

She faltered again then, and Scott could guess what she was feeling. She didn't want to give them the name, because they might react like all the others. She was holding on to the hope of this moment, the hope that they

might believe her as nobody else would. She didn't want to face the fear that they might not.

He reined in his impatience, and let Ororo do the talking. She assured Mrs. Scott that, as mutants, she and her friends had come up against conspiracies before, and that they would listen to any theories she had with open minds. The conversation became sidetracked, as Mrs. Scott sympathized with some of the X-Men's experiences, although Ororo resisted going into too much detail. Eventually, the woman could find no more excuses to stall.

She took a deep breath, and told her visitors the name of the organization; the people whom she believed responsible for the kidnapping of her husband. It was a familiar name, and Scott Summers couldn't help but smile and shake his head at the logic of it all.

He believed her without question.

The meeting had gone well.

The thin man and the bearded man had turned up at half past ten, right on time. They had recognized Jean from Allan Coleman's flattering—if somewhat sexist—description of her, and had sat with her at a small, circular table in the White Lamb's darkest corner. The Beast, disguised by an image inducer, had pretended to bury himself in a newspaper nearby. Having originally picked up *The Independent*, he had had to be talked into swapping it for *The Sun*, the better to blend in. Nightcrawler had concealed himself on the roof, while Rogue had begun the long flight back to Muir Island, under her own power, to fetch the Blackbird.

Jean had given the two men a false name. They had declined to give her their names at all, but she had picked them out of their thoughts, along with their addresses and plenty of other information about them. She had put on a bashful act, as if she had never done anything like this before, as she related her cover story to them. By the time she was halfway through her sorry tale about the fictional no-good husband whom she wanted put out of his misery,

she had already learned everything she wanted. She had continued to talk, though, to allay their suspicions. They had become impatient, and the thin man had begun to wonder why Coleman had thought this woman worthy of their attention. Picking up those thoughts, Jean had had to assure him that she could be very persuasive. No matter how she might feel about her reluctant informant, he didn't deserve to be hunted down and murdered.

Eventually, when she had thought it safe, she had made a show of deciding that she didn't want to go through with the contract after all. The bearded man had made some vague, disgruntled threat about what would happen if she wasted his time again, and Jean had mumbled insincere apologies. Then the two men had left, Jean had followed them out onto the street a few minutes later and made a quick phone call, and the X-Men had regrouped.

Phoenix, Nightcrawler and the Beast stood in the back alley in which they had frightened Allan Coleman half to death, and they waited for the sound of their plane overhead.

"I called the police," said Jean. "I gave them the names and addresses of our two friends, and a list of crimes they might be able to connect them with, including three murders. I was able to give them enough names and dates to make them take me seriously."

"It must have been one of the most extensive anonymous tip-offs they've ever received," mused the Beast.

"And one that can never be traced back to us, nor to Herr Coleman," said Nightcrawler.

"But what news did you garner of our compatriot?"

Phoenix took a deep breath. "It was pretty much as we expected. Our men were hired at extremely short notice, and given blueprints of Muir Island's security systems. Their job was to capture Moira, and they were specifically instructed that they were to take her by surprise."

“Presumably to obviate the possibility of her contacting us,” said the Beast.

“Once they had her, they activated a signaling device that was sent to them anonymously via Federal Express. Within an hour, a Hercules transport plane had arrived on the island. They handcuffed Moira to a fence-post nearby and left her, along with the signal device and a key, just out of her reach, to be collected.”

“So, they weren’t aware of the identities of their employers?” asked the Beast.

- “They were contacted by e-mail, and paid by money.
- “I’ll be the judge of that, I think. What kind of
- “As a matter of fact,” he said shortly, “you’ve di
- Her husband was dead. And she hadn’t seen her beau
- His hunch was proved right. The figure recoiled, s
- They must have been directly over the ballroom, be
- “I don’t like it,” said Wolverine. “Smells like a
- His eyes flickered downward. “I was... otherwise e
- The rest of the group deferred to the bearded man,
- The hatchway didn’t lead to daylight, but nor did
- And the mutate was looking up at him with saucer-w

“They were contacted by e-mail, and paid by money transfers. I memorized the details, but I’d be surprised if the payments were traceable.”

“And they never set eyes upon the occupants of the Hercules?”

“Ah, now that’s where we get lucky!” said Phoenix. “Our men, you see, don’t like not knowing who their employers are. They accepted this contract because the money was good—very good—but they weren’t happy about it.”

“So, let me guess,” said Nightcrawler, with a grin. “They disobeyed orders. One of them sneaked back to get a look at whoever was in that Hercules.”

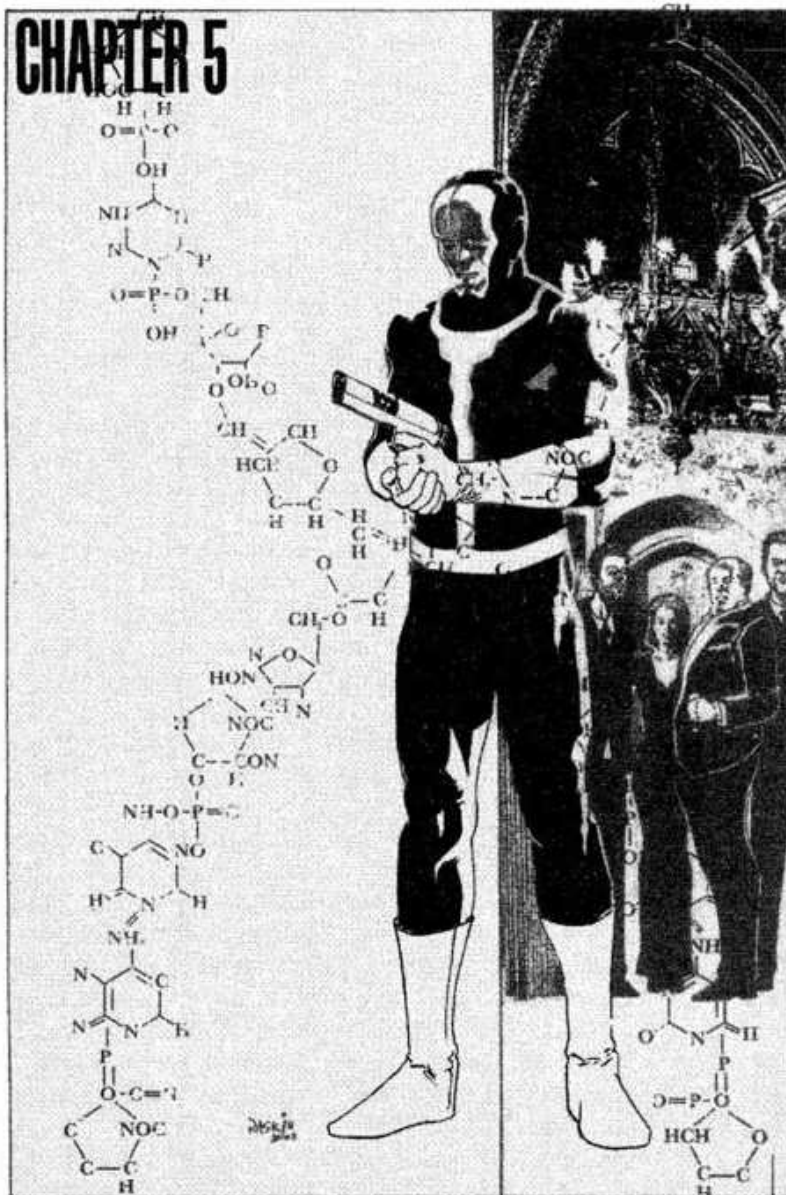
“They saw Moira being loaded into the back of the plane by two men.”

“So, we have another pair of faces to trace?” surmised the Beast.

“Not faces, no. These men were wearing masks.” Jean let those words sink in for a moment, before smiling and adding: “Familiar masks. Flesh-colored, with no features: just slits for the eyes, nose and mouth, and a seam down the center. Dark blue uniforms with red highlights.”

Nightcrawler and the Beast made the connection simultaneously, and all three X-Men announced their conclusion in unison:

“The Hellfire Club!”



OIRA MACTAGGERT slept again, but her dreams were less pleasant this time.

She dreamt of faceless men with guns. They were hunting her. She ran through Edinburgh's empty streets, heart pounding, breathing ragged, and all the time she was weighed down with the dreadful feeling that there was something she had to do. Something important. But she didn't know what it was. She had to get somewhere, but she

didn't know where. And every time she turned a corner, one of the faceless men was in front of her, blocking her way.

The dread stayed with her as she surfaced from the nightmare. Moira tried to combat it by telling herself that everything was all right; that she was still at home on Muir Island and that she had simply dozed off over her lab bench again. But, as sleep fell away from her, her reactivated senses delivered the bad news that this simply wasn't true.

The first thing she noticed was the smell. The stink of engine oil assailed her nostrils. Secondly, she became aware of a throbbing lump on the back of her head. She didn't know where it had come from. Instinctively, she tried to raise her hands to it, but found that they were tied behind her back. Thick rope bit into her wrists, and her shoulders were aching. Moira's hearing kicked in, presenting her with fresh evidence: the distant beating of helicopter blades. She could feel the shape of an uncomfortable wooden chair beneath her. Her stomach was empty, and her chest was burning with the familiar cold-like symptoms of the Legacy Virus.

Finally, she tore open her leaden eyes to complete the picture. The chair to which she was bound stood in the center of a small, wooden-walled room. There was only one door, and the window beside it suggested that it led outside, even if the glass was too grimy to reveal more than a gray haze beyond. Another window, opposite the first, was covered by an old, stained, orange drape, which hung lopsidedly. There were only two other pieces of furniture—a desk and another chair—but, even so, the room seemed cluttered. The desk was stacked high with yellowing pieces of paper in torn manila folders, some of which had brimmed over onto the bare boards of the floor. Shelves lined the walls, filled with neglected tools, dirty cloths and old tins of paint and oil streaked by their own leaked contents. Dust lay on every surface, and cobwebs clung to the corners of the ceiling. Moira didn't recognize the room, but she did have a

distant memory of running across tarmac towards a shed, with the faceless men chasing after her.

Or had that been part of the dream?

She shook her head in an attempt to clear it, and winced as a fresh stab of pain emanated from her wound. No, she thought, as her recent memories tumbled back into place, the faceless men had been real. Hellfire Club agents in their blue and red uniforms, with their all-concealing, featureless faceplates.

The costumes dehumanized them, taking away each agent's individuality. There was no way to tell them apart, no way to know who was under any one blank mask. Perhaps a close friend or a family member, or somebody who lived on the next block and watched you, furtively, as you went to work each morning. The shadowy group of businessmen who employed these mercenaries liked outsiders to imagine that they had eyes everywhere. To a certain extent, they had.

Moira had encountered the Hellfire Club before, and her experience of it had all been bad. Originally formed in London as an exclusive gentleman's club in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the organization now had branches across the world. Membership was considered not only a rare privilege but a status symbol, as was access to the club's famous-and often hedonistic—parties. As a result, those parties provided an environment in which the wealthy and the influential could meet on an informal basis. Many business deals had been struck and alliances formed over the punchbowl, beneath the cloak of secrecy that the Hellfire Club offered. Its influence extended into every corner of life-which made it the perfect cover for a handful of people who chose to use its resources for their own nefarious purposes.

Each branch of the Hellfire Club was ruled by a select Inner Circle, the self-proclaimed Lords Cardinal, who were accountable to nobody. An elite cabal within an elite cabal.

They gave themselves ranks named after chess pieces, and dressed in Victorian clothing to symbolize their rejection of modern-day democratic values. Some Inner Circles did little more than arrange regular social events, but others took a more proactive stance. They were prepared to do whatever it took to perpetuate their own wealth and to ensure that political power remained where it belonged: in the hands of the rich.

Their agents were well trained. Moira's single attempt to escape from them, her act of defiance, had been brought to a swift, brutal end. Ah yes, she thought ruefully, that was where the lump on her head must have come from.

She had kept herself awake during the flight here. That had been a mistake. She had paced the floor of the Hercules' expansive cargo hold, hour after hour, until she had lost track of time. The door to the cockpit had been locked. She had listened at it, making out at least two voices but unable to hear their words over the engine noise. She had tested the door, finding it too sturdy. She might have been able to barge through it, but not at the first attempt—and, without the element of surprise, she would only have found herself staring down gun barrels again. She had bided her time, intending to stay alert, but the flight had gone on and on, and the hold had been so warm and dry. She had begun to feel airsick and so, so tired.

They had landed at last, and it had been easy for Moira to feign sleep as the agents had come for her. She had groaned realistically as a red-gloved hand had slapped her around the face to wake her. She had let two agents haul her to her feet, trying not to show surprise as she had recognized their outfits, and wondering which of the Hellfire Club's Lords Cardinal, from which Inner Circle, they had taken their orders from. She had leaned on them like a dead weight as they had manhandled her towards the back of the airplane, where a third uniformed man had waited.

She had pretended to stumble on the loading ramp, throwing one of her escorts off-balance but hopefully without making him too suspicious. She had forced herself into action, pivoting around to strike out unexpectedly. She had grabbed the second agent's lightweight machine-gun, but hadn't been able to wrench it from his determined grip. She had resorted to Plan B, leaping from the ramp and running for it, taking in her surroundings only in that split-second of adrenaline-fuelled excitement. She had been brought to a small airfield. The Hercules had been the only plane present, and Moira's heart sank as she had taken in the high wire fence around the compound, and the hills beyond it.

Her only hope, she had reasoned, was if the agents had been ordered not to shoot her. It seemed logical. Why bring her all the way here—wherever here was—if she wasn't wanted alive and, with any luck, undamaged? All the same, she had been too weak to outrun them. She had raced along a taxiway towards a small shed, intending to put it between her and her pursuers, to gain precious time to tackle the fence. It had been a desperate, hopeless, ploy. She hadn't taken more than a few steps before she had felt them behind her.

It had probably been a machine-gun butt that had dubbed her to the ground, bringing stars to her eyes and darkness to her mind. She didn't know how long she had been unconscious, how long she had lost to dreams of men without faces and work left undone.

That helicopter was getting closer.

Moira tested the strength of her bonds. They had been tied well. She felt no give at all between her wrists. She tried to move her legs, but they were tied too, to the legs of the chair. The chair, however, was light enough. She could probably walk it across the room, after a fashion. She scanned the shelves, looking for something to make towards; something she could use to cut the ropes. It did

occur to her that she wouldn't have been left with all these tools if her captors had been worried about the prospect of her escaping. More than likely, there was an armed guard or two—or all three of the men who had brought her here—outside. She decided not to think about that. She concentrated on the immediate problem.

She had been in situations like this before. Too many times before. Strange as it seemed, she had become used to having enemies, to having her home invaded and her person attacked, to having to fight against somebody or something almost every day of her life. Sometimes, she wondered how she had come to be here; how Moira Kinross, chieftain of an ancient Scottish clan and keen student of genetic science, had become a standard-bearer for a cause not her own, and a target for those whose own causes were different. Perhaps it had started with Charles Xavier, a fellow student at Oxford University; a man with a dream, and the passion to make her dream it too. Or with Joe MacTaggart:, the abusive husband who had made her swear that she would never be a victim again. Or with Proteus, her son who had been bom a monster, his mind deranged and his body consumed by his mutant X-factor.

There was one thing that the Hellfire Club might have overlooked. Moira MacTaggart had become used to fighting back. And she had the resourcefulness, the experience and the sheer bloody-minded determination to win.

There was a filthy glass jar on one of the lower shelves. If she could knock it off its perch, she would have some shards to work with. She hoisted the chair's back legs off the floor, and tried to hobble forwards. The effort was painful. After only a few steps, she needed to rest. But the sound of the helicopter outside drove her onwards. It was louder now, and there was no doubt in Moira's mind that it was coming here. She was running out of time.

Haste made her clumsy. The chair tripped her up, and she toppled to the floor, unable to put out a limb to save

herself. She managed to twist so that she landed on her left arm, not on her face, but the landing still hurt. She lay there for a few seconds, breathing heavily, trying to work out how she was going to find the leverage to get herself upright again. She was just beginning to accept that it was impossible when she realized she had a leg free.

It took her a moment to work out what had happened: the chair had broken in the fall. A strut had snapped off, allowing the ropes to slip down over the end of its left leg. Moira smiled grimly to herself. Her captors had used good, strong rope, but they hadn't been so careful about what they tied her to.

The helicopter was landing, not too far away. She hoped it would mask the noise she made as she thrashed about and kicked at the chair with her free foot, trying to loosen more of its old joints. The right front leg broke off next, allowing Moira to lift herself to her knees and to crawl awkwardly towards the desk. She wedged the back legs of the chair beneath it and pushed up, as hard as her straining muscles could manage, until she heard the satisfying crack of the chair back splintering away from the seat.

In the sudden silence that followed, she realized that the helicopter engine had been stilled. She was acutely aware of the sound of her own exhausted panting. She made herself hold her breath for a second, and listened.

Footsteps approached the shed.

As heavy bolts were drawn back on the other side of the door, Moira leapt to her feet and grabbed blindly for a weapon off the nearest shelf. Her questing fingers found a large, rusted wrench, and its weight in her hand gave her some reassurance. The door opened inwards, and she concealed herself behind it, her heartbeat reverberating in her ears.

She brought the wrench down hard as soon as she had a target to aim for: a man's head, with black hair scraped back into a ponytail and secured with an elaborate red bow.

It was a palpable strike, and Moira was dismayed to see that it had no effect.

As she had feared, she was facing one of the X-Men's mutant foes: the Hellfire Club was not a mutant organization per se, but mutants did dominate more than one of its Inner Circles.

And, slowly, she realized what this particular mutant's abilities were. Had he simply been invulnerable, then her hand ought to have been ringing now from the impact of the wrench. Instead, it felt as if the blow had cushioned somehow. She put two and two together, even as her enemy turned to face her. "Sebastian Shaw!" she hissed.

"Good morning, Doctor MacTaggart." His voice was silky-smooth, his eyes gleamed with confidence and his tight-lipped smile almost reached his ears. "I'm so glad you were able to meet me at such short notice. I trust you are as well as can be expected?"

"You smug git!" spat Moira. She put all her remaining strength into a shoulder-charge, even though she knew that physical force would be useless against him. Perhaps she could surprise him, make him step aside long enough for her to get through the door.

Hitting Shaw was like walking into a mattress. Moira wasn't brought up short, she just suddenly wasn't moving any more. Her legs almost buckled as her mind and body struggled to cope with this unexpected contravention of the laws of momentum. In contrast, Shaw didn't seem at all perturbed. The only part of him that moved was his left arm, and this shot out now with lightning speed. He seized Moira's right wrist and twisted it, sending a sharp knife of pain up her arm. She winced.

"Perhaps you are forgetting my unique ability, Doctor MacTaggart." Shaw's expression hadn't altered, but his eyes had hardened and his voice had developed a hard, almost sadistic edge. "I can absorb the kinetic energy of any attack you make against me. Absorb it-and convert it into raw

power.” He squeezed her wrist tighter, as if to prove his point. He was certainly strong. Moira gritted her teeth, determined not to cry out.

Then Shaw released his grip and his tone became light again, his words genial, as if nothing untoward had happened. “However, I didn’t bring you here to demonstrate my strength. I must apologize, by the way, for the long flight. You must have been uncomfortable.”

“As if you cared,” muttered Moira.

“I would have had an associate of mine, Trevor Fitzroy, collect you by opening a subspace portal directly from here to your island. However, I’m afraid he would have left an energy signature that might have been identified. And a supersonic aircraft would have attracted the wrong kind of attention. I’m sure you understand.”

“Oh, I understand. You don’t want the X-Men jumping all over whatever sordid little scheme you’ve got going here.”

Shaw tilted his head to one side, as if musing on that thought. “I was also concerned,” he said, “that Fitzroy might get a little... shall we say, over-eager.” His eyes glistened. “I’d hate him to suck your life force dry before I’ve finished with you.”

Moira spat at him, and was gratified to see that, although the saliva hit him softly, it still hit him. The slightest shadow crossed his face, and he produced a silk handkerchief from inside his jacket and dabbed at his cheek. Then he clasped his hands behind his back, turned and crossed the room in a few strides. This simple act irritated Moira. He was showing his prisoner that he wasn’t afraid to present his back to her; that he knew she couldn’t harm him. The worst thing was, he was right. Her eyes flicked towards the door, which had closed by itself. He had left her a clear path to freedom.

“In case you are wondering,” said Shaw without turning, “there are of course three highly-trained agents between you and my helicopter, and a fourth in the pilot’s seat.”

“Still paying those costumed goons to do your dirty work?”

“I still hold the title of Black King.” He was facing her again, and Moira tried not to think about what an imposing figure he cut. It was something about his firm gaze and the way he stood, so sure of himself-as if nothing could touch him, let alone hurt him. He *was* the Black King: nominally the head of only one Inner Circle, but in reality probably the most powerful and respected of any of the Hellfire Club’s Lords Cardinal. He wore a maroon velvet smoking jacket and waistcoat, a gray silk cravat, black breeches and thigh-length black boots. His long sideburns added to the image of a Victorian gentleman, although the facade was as misleading as that of the Hellfire Club itself.

His smile remained as fixed as ever, and Moira longed to wipe it from his self-satisfied face. “Oh?” she sneered. “Last I heard, your own son had deposed you and left you for dead.”

“There were some ... difficulties at our New York branch,” said Shaw tartly, his smile turning into a half-snarl. She felt a thrill of achievement at having cracked his veneer, although it was only a small triumph. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second, as if ridding himself of unwanted memories. When he looked at Moira again, his habitual smirk had returned. “However, I still control Hong Kong’s Inner Circle.”

“And that’s where we are, is it? Hong Kong?”

“My private airfield.” Shaw cast a glance at the untidy desk. “I acquired it rather suddenly from the previous owners,” he said, by way of an explanation for the mess.

“So, are you going to tell me why you’ve dragged me halfway across the world?”

“With pleasure, dear lady.” Shaw motioned Moira towards the remaining wooden chair. “Perhaps you’d like to take a seat? You appear to have left one intact.”

“Fd rather stand,” said Moira stiffly.

Shaw nodded. "As you wish." He pulled up the chair and sat down, crossing his legs and resting his hands upon his knee. "Now, as you are no doubt aware, we two have been pursuing a similar goal of late." '

"If you mean we've both been trying to cure the Legacy Virus "Precisely."

"Except that I doubt your motives are quite the same as mine." "Please, Doctor MacTaggart," said Shaw with mock dismay, "I'm sure I don't know what you're trying to imply!"

"Is that what all this is about? You want to get your hands on my research?"

"Not at all. I had my operatives bring your notes because I thought they might be useful to you. As I'm sure you have guessed by now, Doctor MacTaggart, what I desire is your aid."

"You want me to join you?" Moira shook her head firmly. "You've asked before, Shaw."

"And you declined, as I recall. But how many people have died since then?"

"That's not fair!"

"Isn't it? I'm willing to admit that my research team hasn't had much success.. Can you say any different? The American media has made much of this latest human death, haven't they? Your partner attended the funeral himself, I believe." Moira shouldn't have been surprised that Shaw knew so much. She was taken aback, however, when he leaned forward in his chair and fixed her with a compelling, earnest stare. "How many more funerals, Moira?"

She fought down a lump in her throat, and didn't answer.

Shaw leaned back again and steepled his fingers, thumbs resting on his chest. "I'm suggesting to you, once again, that we pool our resources. Come with me. Take a look at my research facility. I think you'll be surprised."

Moira's interest was piqued, despite herself. "How so?"

"Let's just say I have recently come into possession of some very interesting technology. I doubt if you can even

imagine some of the new avenues that my scientists have begun to explore. In fact, Doctor MacTaggert, I will state here and now that, with the right team on this project, I fully believe that a cure can be found, in weeks rather than months.”

“And you want me to be a part of this team?”

“I want you to lead it. You’re the only person with the knowledge and the skills for the job. Naturally, you will have the best equipment at your disposal, not to mention the best people in the field. You’ve worked with Doctor Rory Campbell before, I think?”

“Oh, yes, I’ve worked with Rory.”

“A very bright young man,” said Shaw.

“Who just happens to know a thing or two about Muir Island’s security systems,” said Moira. Her tone was cold. Rory Campbell had been a friend. He had even lived with her on Muir Island for a time, acting as her assistant. After he had defected, she had changed her security codes, of course. She ought to have had the whole system replaced, but she had trusted him, at least that far. Campbell was not a bad man, or so she had thought: when he had left to work for the Hellfire Club, it had been for all the right reasons. He had believed he could make more progress against the Legacy Virus with the organization’s resources behind him. Moira was still on speaking terms with him, just about—but she would have been lying if she had claimed not to resent his betrayal.

And now she had allowed him to betray her all over again. Shaw’s smile broadened. “I gave him my assurance that you wouldn’t be harmed.”

“Even if I refuse your kind offer?” Moira placed a sarcastic emphasis upon the word ‘kind.’

Shaw pursed his lips as if giving the matter serious thought. “Harmed, no—although it may prove impossible to set you free with the knowledge you are about to acquire.”

"That sounds like a threat, Shaw, however you dress it up."

He smiled again. "But then, why would you turn me down? I'm offering you a great opportunity: the best chance we have ever had to be rid of this virus. You could save millions of lives, your own included."

"And you're doing this solely out of compassion, of course."

"I'm a mutant, as are many of my associates. Is that not reason enough?"

"Where you're concerned, Shaw, no. I take it that, if this team of yours does find a cure, it'll be you who has control over how and when it's used; who gets to live and who doesn't?"

"Is it such a high price to pay?"

"You're damned right it is! When I beat this virus, it will be on my own terms—and you're the last person in the world whose hands I'd let control of a cure fall into."

Shaw laughed. "I can almost hear Xavier talking through you."

"I don't need Charles to tell me the difference between right and wrong!"

"No? You appear to have sacrificed the best part of your life to his cause."

"I don't expect you to understand."

"I understand," said Shaw, "that compromises must be made sometimes. You can't always live a dream."

"You can, if it's a dream worth living for."

"And dying for?"

"Yes!"

"I admire your principles, but I fear they are misguided." Shaw stood up slowly, straightened his jacket and brushed lint from his breeches. "We all share the same dream, in the end. We want to see a world in which *homo superior* are accepted as the natural evolution of *homo sapiens*. Xavier

believes this can be brought about by reasoning with the primitives, by educating them. And yet, in the years since he formed his precious X-Men, anti-mutant sentiment has only grown. His methods have failed.”

“And I suppose you’d rather fight it out,” said Moira, sourly. “Survival of the fittest.”

Shaw frowned. “Please, do not confuse me with the likes of Magneto and the so-called Brotherhood of Mutants. They believe they can take power by force, that they can *make* humanity accept them. But they’ll start a war that can only end when the last human being is dead. No, Doctor MacTaggart, we live in a capitalist world. The only way to achieve true power, to affect real change, is to work within that system. Through the Hellfire Club, I have helped mutants to climb to society’s highest echelons; to build economic and political influence.”

“Fine words, Shaw,” said Moira, “but I know your methods. Your battle plan might be sneakier than Magneto’s, but you’re no less ready to sacrifice anyone and everyone for the sake of your own twisted goals.”

Shaw’s face hardened, almost imperceptibly. “I’m sorry you feel that way. But I still believe that, once you have seen what I have to show you, you might change your mind. I sincerely hope, for your sake, that you do.”

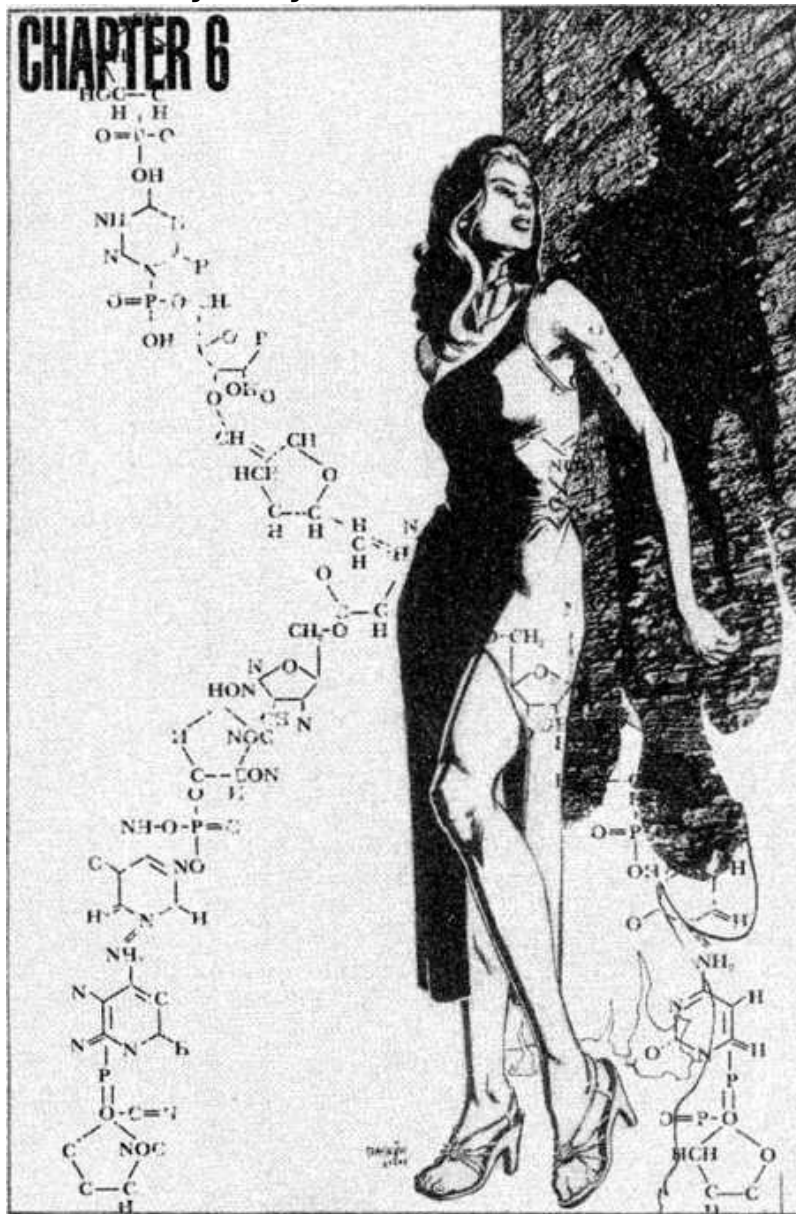
He swept past her, opened the door and strode outside. Immediately, a Hellfire Club agent stepped into the shed, gun at the ready. Moira marched after Shaw without waiting to be told. This must have been what he wanted, for the agent fell into step behind her.

“For my sake?” she shouted at Sebastian Shaw’s back.

He was heading across the tarmac towards the large, black helicopter that must have brought him here. Its blue-ana-red-uniformed pilot saw him coming, and started the engine. The rotors created a blast of air, which struck Moira in the face and blew her hair into disarray.

Shaw spoke softly, but she just made out his words above the din.

"For everybody's sake!" he said.



THE X-MEN'S Blackbird had raced the night back to the United States. The village of Salem Center was wrapped in darkness now, _but a light still burned at the top of Graymalkin Lane. In the conference room of the Xavier Institute, another meeting was taking place. A counsel of war.

"I think we're all agreed," said Cyclops, "all roads lead to the Hellfire Club. Clyde Scott was approached by its representatives shortly before his abduction, and Moira was delivered to Hellfire Club mercenaries." He cast an eye over his teammates: Phoenix, Wolverine, Storm, Nightcrawler, Iceman, the Beast and Rogue. Seven of the most powerful mutants in the world; eight, including himself. But they still had their work cut out for them.

"About time we shut those suckers down once and for all," muttered Wolverine, leaning back in his chair and resting his heels on the table.

"It's never that easy though, is it, sugar?" said Rogue.

"The Hellfire Club have thrived for centuries," warned Storm.

"Our next step," said Cyclops, "is to find out exactly which branch we're dealing with. Experience suggests that the various Inner Circles usually work independently of each other, and that the most likely candidates for a brazen move like this are New York, Hong Kong and London."

"As far as I know," Nightcrawler spoke up, "London's Inner Circle hasn't reformed since the Black Air fiasco. I've spoken to Brian Braddock-Captain Britain-and asked him to snoop around a bit, but I think we can count them out for now."

"Which leaves us with Hong Kong and New York."

"Sebastian Shaw is still the Black King of the Hong Kong Inner Circle," said Phoenix, "and, the last we heard, Selene had taken control in New York."

"Didn't they used to be buddies?" asked Iceman.

"Selene was Shaw's Black Queen until recently," said Cyclops, "but I'd say they were uneasy allies at best. It's a good point, though. We can't just assume that Selene has defected. She might be working with Shaw to control both branches."

"Then I suggest we investigate both simultaneously," said Storm. "I agree. That way, if they are still affiliated,

they won't get the chance to send warnings to each other." Cyclops looked around the table, mentally dividing the eight X-Men into two teams of four. When he reached his wife, he hesitated. Then, looking away from her, he said: "Ororo, take the Blackbird and take Logan, Kurt and Rogue to the Hong Kong branch. Hank, Bobby, Jean and I will see what Selene's up to."

He felt Jean's smile in his mind, the telepathic equivalent of a loving squeeze of the hand. She was grateful to him for not sending her to China. They both knew why. No doubt some of the others did too. Phoenix would do her duty as an X-Man, of course—but if she could avoid meeting Sebastian Shaw in the process, she would be all the happier. More than that, there was one particular member of Shaw's Inner Circle whom neither she nor Scott ever wanted to encounter again.

"Hong Kong's twelve hours behind us," said Wolverine. "We can catch a few hour's shut-eye and still leave early enough on Saturday morning to be there by Friday midnight."

"At which time," said Nightcrawler, "there'll be a party in full swing, if I know the Hellfire Club. That should make it easier to infiltrate their headquarters."

"Agreed," said Cyclops, with a nod. "We'll wait until you're in position before we approach the New York branch."

"Good idea," said Iceman, with feeling. "If we have to confront that witch Selene in her lair, then I'll be a lot happier doing it in the full light of day."

To the mutant sorceress Selene, no sound was sweeter than that of human souls in torment. The screams that echoed around her catacombs, night and day, were her music, and she savored their harmonies now. As she walked, minor demons skittered out of her path and took refuge in the shadows. Fires burnt in wall-mounted braziers, and bathed the cracked stone walls in flickering light. The air

was thick with the stench of brimstone. To most people, the heat would have been oppressive.

Selene had come from entertaining her more traditional guests upstairs. She still wore her low-cut, figure-hugging black evening dress. But it was the guests down here, in her true domain, who really interested her. Down in the lower levels of the building, nightmare chambers brought people face to face with their personal fears, in illusory form. But further below, in these stygian depths, mind scans and Virtual Reality devices were not needed. Here, Selene had constructed a nightmare that spoke to the shared terrors of all human beings-and it was real.

Externally, the grand old Hellfire Club building on Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, had hardly changed in three centuries. Like the organization that had owned it all that time, it retained its respectable facade. Inside, however, the new Black Queen had made changes.

The Hellfire Club lived up to its name now.

Attracted by the anguished timbre of one particular wail, Selene opened a cell door and peered inside. A man hung from his ankles, chains wrapped around his black tuxedo, over a pit of fire. Sweat beaded his balding pate. His jacket was torn where Selene's demons had attacked it with claws and whips. He looked at Selene with frightened but longing eyes, and tried to raise his head, but groaned with the effort.

Selene pursed her full, red lips into a smile, flicked her long, silken, jet black hair back over her shoulders and strode into the rough-hewn room. "Hush now, Mr. Pemberton," she cooed. "You wouldn't want to attract the further attention of my good friend Blackheart, now would you?" To underscore her point, she gestured with a hand and made the flames leap higher. They licked around Pemberton's forehead and threatened to bum what remained of his hair. He grimaced and breathed in deeply, but didn't make another sound. He was terrified of Selene's

ally, the son of Mephisto himself. Almost as terrified as he was of Selene.

She nuzzled his chin with her long fingers, and wiped away a stream of blood, which oozed sluggishly down from beneath his collar. "Help me," he pleaded, in a dry, throaty voice. "I've had... enough..."

"Oh, dear," said Selene, with mock pity. "I think you're forgetting the terms of our agreement, Mr. Pemberton. We decide when you have had enough, not you." Her expression hardened, and she snatched her hand away and clicked her fingers twice.

In obedient response, a stooped demon appeared in the doorway.

It was clad in the uniform of a Hellfire Club agent, and indeed it had been human once, before Selene had ripped its soul out of its body. It wore no mask. Its face—with its flaking parchment skin and blank, staring eyes—was exposed. At a cursory nod from its mistress, the demon's toothless mouth cracked into a malevolent grin. It scampered over to the fire and produced an iron poker, which it lay across the open pit to warm the metal. Mr. Pemberton whimpered, and tears trickled down from his eyes to evaporate in the heat of the flames.

To Selene's displeasure, her mystical senses chose that moment to alert her of something.

"Excuse me, Mr. Pemberton," she apologized, "but it seems I have more pressing business. My ears are burning, and I expect you know how uncomfortable that can feel." She smiled at her own little joke, and put a hand to her mouth, smearing his blood across her lips. "My servant will take care of you. I can promise you his undivided attention."

As she left the cell, Selene's expression darkened, and furrows appeared in the pale skin of her forehead. She muttered a short mantra in an ancient language, and activated a pre-prepared spell. She reached out her right hand, palm upwards, and her scrying device—what

sideshow mystics would refer to as a crystal ball—materialized upon it.

Shadows chased each other across the globe's surface, resolving into the shapes of familiar faces. Cyclops. Phoenix. Iceman. "So," mused Selene, "I wonder what business the X-Men have with me?"

... the last we heard, said the voice of Phoenix, transmitted by the crystal into Selene's mind, *Selene had taken control in New York.*

Selene was Shaw's Black Queen until recently, said Cyclops. Then: *We can't just assume that Selene has defected. She might be working with Shaw to control both branches. And: Bobby, Jean and I will see what Selene's up to.*

Iceman was next. His words brought a smile to the eavesdropper's face. *If we have to confront that witch Selene in her lair, then I'll be a lot happier doing it in the full light of day.*

She sent the ball back to her inner sanctum, and lost herself in thought. In the cell behind her, Mr. Pemberton began to scream again. Idly, she licked his blood from her lips, and enjoyed its rich, salty taste.

It wasn't the same, though, she reflected wistfully. Torture was never quite as satisfying when the recipients were willing participants in the process. And indeed, some members of the Hellfire Club paid good fractions of their considerable fortunes for the privilege of enacting their masochistic fantasies. Selene had learned to content herself with the bittersweet mixture of pain and pleasure she could coax from them. She couldn't afford to draw too much attention, so it was rare that she allowed herself the treat of kidnapping a total innocent—usually a vagrant—and bringing him down here.

Sometimes, of course, she could go a little further than her customers wanted. It didn't stop most of them from coming back for more.

But now, the X-Men were paying her a visit. And, at the very least, this meant that the Black Queen could look forward to an entertaining diversion.

At best, perhaps she would be able to indulge herself after all.

The Hellfire Club's Pacific Rim headquarters was situated on the south side of Hong Kong Island. The building maintained a dignified distance from the overcrowded, noisy bars and evening markets of the north, while remaining as close as it needed to be to the bustling financial district and to the millionaire's paradise of Deepwater Bay. Its architects had sited it in the traditional manner, facing towards the sea, its back to the rolling hills. This had once been a peaceful, leafy area-but progress and the city center had encroached upon it, and concrete skyscrapers now grew between the trees.

The building itself was a wide, single-story construction in the classic Chinese style: all overhanging eaves and pillars. A two-story pagoda, housing a rooftop garden, rose from the sloping roof to a pointed spire. A broad flight of steps led up to a narrow plaza in front of the building. They were guarded by a pair of stone dragons on plinths, breathing real fire.

For some time now, Rogue and Nightcrawler had watched from the shadows between this building and the next, as a succession of well-dressed men and women, reeking of affluence, were drawn in by the lights that shone out from the veranda. The population of Hong Kong was 98% Asian-but, although the club had welcomed many Chinese guests tonight, it seemed to Rogue that it also attracted more than its fair share of expatriate white Americans and Britons.

A white limousine pulled up, and a woman poured herself out of the back. She was middle-aged and gray-haired, tall and slender, with a fur coat and a diamond necklace that had probably cost more money than Rogue had ever seen. This was obviously not her first port of call tonight. She

could hardly stand. She rapped her knuckles on the car roof as a signal to her driver that he was no longer needed. In doing so, she leaned too heavily against the vehicle, and almost fell as it pulled away. She made circling motions with her arms to keep herself upright, then put a hand to her mouth and looked around with wide-eyed, sniggering embarrassment to see if anyone had seen.

"I think it's time," said Kurt.

They stepped into the light, Rogue leading the way. She had pinned up her hair, applied more makeup than usual and squeezed her muscular but shapely body into an elegant blue, long-sleeved frock. The result was a total transformation. Rogue didn't even *feel* like herself. She hardly dared move, in case her hair fell down or she burst out of her expensive clothing or was tripped by her treacherous high heels. Nevertheless, she managed a clumsy, teetering half-run along the sidewalk towards the drunken woman.

"*Dah-ling!*" she cried out, trying to soften her broad Southern accent. "Darling, it *is* you!" The woman, already halfway up the steps, turned and squinted at her myopically, without recognition. Rogue didn't give her the chance to put her sozzled brain into gear. She put a silk-gloved hand on the woman's shoulder and steered her back down onto the sidewalk, where her teammate was waiting.

It took more than a change of clothing to disguise the blueskinned, demonic Nightcrawler. However, thanks to an image inducer, he currently wore a handsome face with a pencil-thin moustache, and a tailored suit. Rogue knew that the resemblance to Errol Flynn was deliberate. Between them, the two X-Men certainly looked like any one of the other young, wealthy couples who had passed through the doors of the Hellfire Club in the past hour or two. But there was one thing they still needed: an invitation.

"You've met my good friend Kurt, haven't you?" Rogue continued, guiding the woman along the sidewalk. "Of

course you have. So, how are you these days? It's been so long. You really must let me take you for a drink some time. We have so much to catch up on."

So far, the woman had allowed herself to be led. But now she resisted, shrugging off Rogue's hand and coming to a determined, if slightly unsteady, halt. Rogue glanced uneasily over her shoulder. They hadn't come as far as she would have liked. But the woman, drunk though she was, had clearly begun to realize that she had never met these two strangers in her life. And, with another car already pulling up at the steps, Rogue couldn't afford to let her cause a scene.

She pulled off her glove, reached for the woman's face ... And hesitated.

As soon as Rogue's bare skin touched that of the woman, she would absorb her memories, her personality, her very self. It was her blessing and her curse. In her younger, wilder days, she had used her ability with abandon, exulting in the fact that she could steal the powers of other mutants and super-powered individuals. Now, though, she was more mature, and more aware of the consequences of her actions, both for her victims and for herself.

She had gone too far once. She had held onto a woman called Carol Danvers-the Avenger called Ms. Marvel-for too long. And something had gone wrong. Badly wrong.

Rogue owed her powers of flight, great strength and nearinvulnerability to Carol. Unlike the other abilities she had absorbed over the years, they showed no signs of fading. But there was a part of Carol in her mind as well; a part that, at first, had railed against the injustice of Rogue's actions and had waged war upon her from within, almost tearing her psyche apart.

Rogue hated to use her innate ability now, but she couldn't turn it off. And it had grown even stronger. The only way she could control it now was by wrapping herself in heavy clothing, forever denying herself intimate contact

with others. But she felt she had no choice. She knew what the real Carol Danvers had been through, and she wouldn't wish that kind of suffering upon anyone. And she was also fearful of allowing new voices into her head, of taking the risk that they would stay with her forever, chipping away at her old self until there was nothing left that was truly her at all.

Rogue looked at Kurt, and he must have seen the fear in her eyes because he responded with a reassuring nod. He would be here, if anything too bad happened.

She wished Phoenix could have been here too. Then she wouldn't have to do this.

There was a painful knot of anxiety in her stomach, and she had to will herself to reach out, slowly, with one finger, towards the inebriated woman's cheek until she just... *brushed... against her skin ... and she was Mrs. Lavinia Smith, widowed but well provided for by her philandering husband Philip, who had been a director of an arms export business, and she had a taste for hard-centered chocolates but she couldn't stand dogs, nasty yipping little things, and she was sometimes lonely in that big old house in the hills and once, as a teenager in a West Hollywood school, she had lured Michael Craig from the football team into the stockroom and she reeled with the onslaught of thoughts and memories pouring into her with the impact of a high-pressure hose, and she wanted to scream but she clenched her fists and redirected the sound into a low groan from her stomach, and the world shot out of focus and she hoped she had managed to separate herself from the woman Lavinia, who didn't like the smell of after-shave and who always tried to put aside one hour in the afternoon to read because she just couldn't tell.*

Slowly, painfully, Rogue climbed back up to the surface of her own mind, relieved to find that she appeared to be intact and in control. Lavinia had collapsed and Kurt had caught her-but the woman still clung to consciousness,

murmuring under her breath. Considering the state she had already been in, things had turned out remarkably well. Rogue put her glove back on, and answered Kurt's concerned look with a nod.

It was the work of only seconds, then, to search Lavinia's purse for her Hellfire Club membership card, which was exactly where she remembered leaving it. Her name was embossed into the golden square of plastic, below an upturned trident with a short handle. Simultaneously, Kurt scanned the woman's form into a spare image inducer.

By the time the next taxicab arrived, they were ready to bundle Lavinia Smith into the back, attracting only the briefest of gazes from the young Chinese couple who had arrived in the vehicle, and a world-weary sigh from the driver. "Our friend has had a little too much to drink, I'm afraid," said Rogue apologetically, before retrieving the woman's address from her borrowed memories, handing over some money and sending the cab on its way. The driver would probably have to help his customer through her front door, but she would be all right.

Then the two X-Men slipped surreptitiously back into the shadows. When they reemerged, a few minutes later, one of them looked very different.

The Fifth Avenue brownstone headquarters of the Hellfire Club's New York chapter stood only a few blocks from the home of the Avengers, opposite Central Park. As Scott Summers and Jean Grey climbed the steps that led to the entrance, people wandered past on the sidewalk behind them. It felt odd to be conducting X-Men business out of costume and in such a public place. But Scott was determined not to let the innocuous surroundings lull him into a false sense of security. Selene was a deadly, unpredictable foe. He was well aware that they could find themselves fighting for their lives at any moment.

The main doors were framed by a large, stone archway, into each side of which was set the club's familiar upturned

trident symbol. They were locked, and the tall windows in the front wall were blank and dark. This building only came alive at night.

Jean pressed the bell, and Scott listened to its deep, sonorous tones echoing deep inside the mansion house. The couple exchanged a nervous glance as they awaited a response.

At last, footsteps shuffled down the front hallway, and the door was pulled open. Scott's eyes widened at the sight of a grotesque demon in the familiar costume of the Hellfire Club's mercenary agents. He tensed, and raised a hand to his ruby quartz glasses. They didn't give him the fine control of his visor, but he could lift them and unleash his optic beam if he had to. But the demon simply leered at its two visitors, and beckoned them inside with an expansive sweep of its arm.

Be *careful*, Jean telemented, not only to her husband but to Iceman and the Beast, who were waiting within telepathic range at the back of the building. *Selene might have been expecting us.* The sorceress was making a point by flaunting her club's true nature this way.

They followed the demon along a deep-carpeted passageway, past oak-paneled walls decorated with valuable old paintings, past the familiar ballroom with its grand staircase, and down a narrower, twisting flight of stairs to the first basement level. Selene was waiting beside an open door, leaning against the wall and studying her fingernails with a casualness that was belied by the steel-trap alertness in her deep, green eyes. She was provocatively dressed in a black leather teddy, which left her arms, the tops of her legs and a substantial section of her cleavage exposed. A cape, also black, was draped around her shoulders, and she wore knee-length black boots and long, finger-less gloves.

"Well, well, Mr. and Mrs. Summers," she greeted the couple, rolling the words on her tongue as if enjoying their

taste. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? Perhaps you'd like to see how my Hellfire Club is faring under new management?" She pushed herself up from the wall and stalked through the door, beckoning Scott and Jean to follow her with a raised arm and a coiled finger, but not looking to see if they did.

Selene's office was furnished like a throne room, with gold trim and velvet drapes—and, yes, a large, central throne, upon which she now perched. But there was a dark quality to the decor, with light fittings and ornaments twisted into demonic shapes, framed paintings depicting vistas of various underworlds, and a raised stone dais upon which sat a crystal ball. Candles burnt in the corners of the room, but somehow didn't light them, and a thin veil of smoke hung over the air.

"I'm sure you are both aware," Selene told her guests, "that you don't qualify to become full members of the Hellfire Club in your own rights. Your, ah, financial situations do not permit it. Still—" She waved a hand, magnanimously. "—I am prepared to extend certain ... facilities to you. You are, after all, close associates of at least two of our most valued members." She smiled, and showed her teeth. "And old friends of mine, of course."

"We aren't here to make small talk, Selene," said Scott, gruffly. "No?" Selene gave him a look of disappointment, but shrugged it off. "I do apologize. If this is a formal visit, then you should have dressed the part." She made a gesture with both hands—and, before her visitors could react, their clothes came alive, rippling and transforming, changing shape and color, until Scott Summers and Jean Grey found themselves standing in the costumes of Cyclops and Phoenix.

"Nice party trick," said Phoenix, with false pleasantness. Cyclops was already worrying about how they would get out of here without causing mayhem. He would probably have

to ask his wife to cloud the minds of any onlookers, to make them doubt what they saw.

"And you really should have invited your colleagues to join us," said Selene. She gestured again, and Iceman and the Beast materialized, looking thoroughly confused. "It is sheer bad manners to enter somebody's home uninvited-and by a rear window, at that."

"OK, Selene," said Cyclops, attempting to regain control of the situation, "you win that one. Now, let's get down to business."

"You mean your search for your lost friend." The four X-Men glanced at each other, and Selene took visible delight in having disconcerted them again.

"Then you *do* know where Moira is," said Cyclops, bluntly.

"The question is," she mused, "what kind of a mood am I in today? I might not feel predisposed towards assisting those who have tried to invade my privacy; who have, indeed, upset my plans in the past. Or perhaps I am feeling more ... playful."

"You might be in the mood for playing games, Selene," said Cyclops, "but let me warn you now, I'm not!"

"Oh, Cyclops!" Selene was more amused than intimidated. She stood up and swept towards him, her cape trailing across the floor. "Always so earnest, so grim. Give me a few hours with you, and I could really loosen you up. And Iceman ..She caressed Bobby's chin with her hand. He recoiled from her touch. "Poor, scared little Iceman. You don't want to be here at all, do you? Unlike Phoenix here, who's hoping against hope that I'm the person you're looking for-because, if I'm not, she'll have to face her past all over again."

Selene stopped in front of the Beast, who returned her gaze evenly. "Ah, but you, my little blue friend, your eyes tell the most interesting story of all. Your wishes conflict with Ms. Grey's, do they not? You, most of all, are looking for

answers, but you'd prefer not to find them here. Your hopes are high, but your fears are still greater."

"Selene," growled Cyclops.

She turned her back on them, with a dismissive gesture. "I am bored with you all. But I suppose the easiest way to be rid of you is to reveal what I know about the MacTaggart woman's whereabouts." She retook her throne and leaned forwards, with a conspiratorial gleam in her eyes.

"Very well, then. I will tell you."

Kurt Wagner loitered by the French windows, flashing his Errol Flynn grin at anyone who looked his way, but avoiding too much eye contact, determined not to get drawn into conversation. The Hellfire Club was busy tonight, its ballroom packed with the cream of Hong Kong society. Well-dressed couples swayed on the dance floor to the strains of a classical orchestra, while fat men in business suits sat in plush, leather armchairs, smoked cigars and swapped bawdy jokes.

Kurt was relieved when Rogue finally reappeared from the direction of the restrooms. She had turned off her image inducer, and she looked slightly nervous to be braving the crowd with her own face. She needn't have worried. She blended in perfectly in her elegant clothes, and she was certainly drawing less attention than she had before. The inducer had been useful for getting the two X-Men past the doormen as Mrs. Lavinia Smith and guest, but the middle-aged widow had proved a little too popular with the club's clientele. Within minutes, Rogue had been intercepted by three different 'friends'. She had had to draw upon Lavinia's fading memories to put on a convincing act, until she could politely excuse herself.

Kurt took two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, and handed one to his teammate. They drank and smiled, and gazed into each other's eyes, like lovers who didn't wish to be disturbed in their quiet corner. But, rather than whispering sweet nothings into Kurt's ear, Rogue was

telling him about the security arrangements she had observed outside the ballroom. Presently, they linked arms, and she guided him casually across the room. There were three sets of interior doors, opposite the front windows, leading deeper into the building. Only one, however—on the far left—stood open.

Kurt stepped out into the corridor. Between him and the restrooms, a man and a woman were leaning against each other and giggling. He let their bodies cover him as he slipped behind a potted plant on an antique table and crouched down, pretending that his shoelaces needed tying. Peering between the leaves of the plant, he could see what Rogue had already described: two more corridors led off this one, directly away from the ballroom. In her Lavinia Smith persona, Rogue had affected drunkenness and stumbled towards the nearest, only to be turned around and sent back the way she had come by two muscular men in tuxedos who lurked just around the corner.

Kurt waited until the giggling couple had returned to the ballroom. Then, when he was alone, he turned off his inducer and crawled straight up the wall. And, clinging to the shadows where the wall met the ceiling, he advanced towards the first junction.

Nightcrawler's body tended to get lost in shadows. It wasn't just that his dark coloration made him blend in. It was one of the more bizarre effects of his mutant gene that, when there were no lights upon him, he became almost a part of the darkness himself, even down to the red and white highlights of his costume. Thus, as he rounded the corner and set eyes upon the two bruisers about whom Rogue had warned him, they didn't see him. They were deep in conversation below him, talking about a recent poker game, their postures relaxed, not expecting trouble. It was simple enough for Nightcrawler to slip past them.

He turned another corner, and was pleased to find himself in an empty corridor from which several doors led.

One of these doors opened, and two Hellfire Club agents emerged, uniformed and armed. Nightcrawler caught his breath, but the mercenaries hadn't seen him. They marched away, in step with each other, and disappeared down a flight of stairs. He smiled grimly to himself. He was in the heart of the Hellfire Club building now. The real face of the organization was exposed to him; the one that the public weren't ever meant to see.

He checked the corridor for security cameras, but didn't see any. He relaxed his adhesive grip on the ceiling, and somersaulted to a soft landing.

Now, he wondered, which of these doors led to Sebastian Shaw's office?

He spent the next half-hour searching, peering through keyholes and listening at doors, staying in the shadows when he could, and scampering back up to the ceiling if he heard anything that sounded like an approaching footstep. He ventured inside a couple of likely-looking offices, but didn't find what he was looking for.

At last, through a keyhole, he spied a room that was conspicuously more opulent than the others, with expensive wallpaper and exquisite furnishings. *Fit for a Black King*, he thought. *And Shaw's never been one to be modest about his position, nor his wealth. If this isn't where he hangs his hat, then I'll program the image inducer to create a hat of my own-and eat it.*

His restricted view of the room hadn't revealed any occupants, but he decided to be careful. He climbed the wall again and, reaching down, knocked three times on the door. He waited long enough to be sure that nobody was going to answer, before dropping back to the floor and trying the handle. The door was locked.

After taking one final glance up and down the corridor, Nightcrawler concentrated, visualized the inside of the office, and disappeared in a cloud of brimstone.

The hairs on the back of Wolverine's neck stood up, an instant before the comm-set on his belt began to beep. "Sounds like Rogue and the elf are in trouble," he grunted.

The X-Men had found the office of a Hong Kong investments firm, deserted for the night, midway up a skyscraper overlooking the Hellfire Club building. Wolverine had spent the last two hours here, with Storm. They had made good use of the company's coffee-making facilities and had taken it in turns to keep watch at the window. Having seen nothing out of the ordinary so far, they had begun to hope that their teammates would return soon, their mission accomplished. This signal meant that, instead, they were in danger.

"Time to send in the cavalry!" said Wolverine. Storm had already thrown open a window and summoned a wind, to keep her aloft as she carried her Canadian teammate the short distance to their enemies. But suddenly, Wolverine detected a faint whiff of ozone in the air, and, with a cry of, "'Ro! Get down!" he flung himself to the floor behind a desk.

Wolverine's enhanced senses made it all but impossible to sneak up on him. But one of Sebastian Shaw's subordinates in his Inner Circle was a teleporter, like Nightcrawler. Except that, in his case, he used the stolen life energy of others to open temporary portals between places, times and dimensions. Wolverine knew this, and he had been prepared—at least, as prepared as he could be—to face an attack from nowhere.

Sure enough, the air shimmered and the room itself seemed to turn inside out as a hole was ripped through the fabric of reality. An upright circle of roiling energies opened to hang, impossibly, suspended in midair, and a dozen or so costumed mercenaries emerged, guns at the ready.

Standing in their center was a green-haired young mutant, almost swamped by his cumbersome battle armor. Wolverine knew his name. It was Trevor Fitzroy—but these days he was also known as the White Rook.

This was obviously part of a two-pronged attack. Whatever danger Nightcrawler and Rogue had found themselves in, they couldn't expect any help from their backup team now.

They were on their own.



FIVE MINUTES earlier:

Sebastian Shaw had left his desktop computer on: its monitor

_displayed a screensaver on which an eternal flame licked at an

upturned trident. If nothing else, it provided a useful light source, as did the glow from the streetlights outside, which filtered into the office through bamboo blinds. It may not have been much-but Nightcrawler had excellent night-vision, and he was able to search the room without turning on any telltale lights. He found nothing of note, however, until he turned his attention to the computer itself.

He took a quick look around its directories and noticed that there was something in one of the CD drives. A backup? Could he be that lucky? He clicked on the CD icon.

And, at that moment, he heard a sound outside the door. A key in the lock.

He leapt onto Shaw's desk and bounced up towards the motionless ceiling fan, via a backward flip that landed him squarely on the underside of its four rotors. He only just made it before the door opened, and two uniformed mercenaries burst into the office. They were followed by an albino woman, with angular features and long hair that was as white as her skin. She was clad in red leather, which matched the severe shade of her lipstick and nail polish, and left much of her skin exposed. Nightcrawler recognized her face, if not the costume. Her name was Scribe, and she had worked for the Hellfire Club's English branch before its downfall. He remembered hearing that she had been bailed out of prison-and that she, along with another of the club's associates, had dropped out of sight. But she had never been a member of London's Inner Circle, merely a paid lackey, and he hadn't expected to find her here.

She was looking right at him.

With a narrow-eyed smirk, she reached for two switches, which sat side by side on the wall. She flicked them both. A harsh light robbed Nightcrawler of his concealing shadows, and he leapt from the fan, startled, as it began to turn. He could have stayed out of Scribe's reach on the ceiling, but

the agents were already bringing up their machine-guns to cover him and, now that he couldn't hide any more, he thought it best to take the fight to them.

Anyway, if this was the best the Hellfire Club had to throw at him, he shouldn't have to exert himself too much.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's polite to knock?" he quipped, as he planted a three-toed foot squarely in each of the mercenaries' blank-masked faces, throwing off their aims and staggering them. Before they could recover, he had 'ported across the room, putting Scribe between him and their weapons, and giving him a free attack at her back. It wasn't very chivalrous, he chided himself, but then the odds were three to one. He reached for Scribe's throat, but was dumbfounded when she evaded his grasp almost without seeming to move. He had never faced her in combat before, and he hadn't realized how fast she was. Indeed, she had already turned to face him, and she lashed out with savage precision. He threw himself backwards, but her fingernails still came within a hair's breadth of his face. While he was still reeling, she took an impossible standing leap backwards over the heads of the agents, giving them a clear target again. They strafed the front wall of the office with machine-gun fire, but their bullets passed through a cloud of brimstone.

Nightcrawler appeared in between them, took hold of their heads and knocked them together. They fell, but Scribe had already taken her opportunity to close in, and he felt a white-hot slash of pain as she raked her nails across his back. Instinctively, he teleported again, denying her the chance to press her advantage. But, almost as soon as he had appeared on the ceiling, Scribe reacted to his new position, swept up a heavy chair and hurled it at him. It hit the X-Man full on, dislodging him. He tumbled towards the floor, where Scribe was already waiting for him. "Come to Scribe, little goblin!" she cackled gleefully.

He teleported in mid-fall, materialized at her right hand side and immediately 'ported again to appear at her left. He had time to land just a single punch as she turned first one way and then the other, then he made three more 'ports in quick succession, and struck a second blow.

He kept up the hit-and-run tactics, trying to keep one step ahead of his opponent, but her speed was inhuman. She struck out at random, almost seeming to be able to attack in three directions at once. Her reflexes outperformed his; at last, her questing hands found the front of his red tunic and she drove him backwards into Shaw's desk, the impact winding him.

Nightcrawler gasped for breath as Scribe pinned him into place. He brought up his feet to kick against her-and his senses reeled as he thought he saw an insubstantial face, like that of a ghost, hovering in the air between them. He blinked, and suddenly remembered Scribe's erstwhile colleague: the second bail-jumping servant of the Hellfire Club in London.

That was when he realized how he had been tricked.

"Mountjoy!" he wheezed.

The spectral face was clearer now. Nightcrawler recognized its blank, staring eyes, and the lank brown hair that hung untidily down to its shoulders and formed a tuft on its pointed chin. The body-jumper must have been hitching a ride, inactive, inside Scribe, as he had done before, waiting for a chance to strike. His image was already becoming less distinct again as, instead of reforming his own physical body, he poured his essence into a second host. Nightcrawler could feel him, insinuating himself upon his every cell, taking control of his muscles. It was too late to teleport away. He could barely move his own arm, but he managed to reach inside his tunic for his comm-set, and to clumsily activate the emergency signal.

"He's summoned his teammates," Nightcrawler told Scribe, but the words didn't come from his mind even

though he felt them emerging from his own throat, being modified by his own tongue and lips. “I couldn’t take control quickly enough to stop him.”

“Do you have full control now?” asked Scribe.

“I do.”

She relaxed her grip, and Nightcrawler stood and flexed his arms and legs, testing out his muscles as if they were new to him. They *were* new, of course, to the intelligence that controlled him. Kurt Wagner didn’t feel any different—he was still there, still conscious; he couldn’t even feel Mountjoy’s presence any more, not as such—but his body was acting independently of his commands. No matter how hard he concentrated on even such a simple act as lifting a finger, he couldn’t make it happen. He could have screamed with frustration, except that he no longer had access to a mouth and lungs to scream with.

“Then we’d better make some more noise, hadn’t we?” said Scribe, with a twisted grin on her face and a dark fire in her eyes. “I’d hate for the other X-Men to be unable to find us.”

She seemed supremely confident, but Nightcrawler was sure that Rogue, Wolverine and Storm together could beat her, even if Mountjoy forced him to fight at Scribe’s side.

He only hoped the Hellfire Club hadn’t prepared any more unpleasant surprises.

Fitzroy was using the Hellfire Club’s mercenaries as cannon fodder. They formed a living barrier, keeping Wolverine from reaching their White Rook, without any sign that they were worried about the likely cost to themselves. He ploughed into them hard. His adamantium claws popped through his skin with a *snikt*, and he sliced through the barrels of three machine-guns. The agents themselves he attacked with fists and feet. He didn’t want to kill them, not if he didn’t have to. Still, the first one who came too close—thinking he could grapple the X-Man to the ground—earned

a shallow slash across his cheek that cut through his mask and drew blood. He would probably bear the scar for life.

Wolverine could have dealt with goons like this in his sleep. The frustrating thing was, it would take time, during which Trevor Fitzroy could be up to anything. Storm, meanwhile, had taken to the air, although the office had a low ceiling, which prevented her from climbing too high. More than Wolverine, she believed in using reasonable force; she had excellent control over her elemental powers and, where necessary, would soften her blows to avoid killing or maiming a foe. But she had faced Fitzroy before, and she knew the strength of his bio-armor. She brought down a lightning bolt, which smashed its way through the window, crackled over the heads of Wolverine and the mercenaries, and struck the villain squarely in the chest.

Fitzroy's armor, like the man himself, was a product of the future. His arms and legs were plated with a tough, golden metal, but his head and torso were protected by something more elaborate: a clear, crystalline substance, which looked like diamond and was probably as durable. Something black and indistinct coalesced in its depths, around its wearer's chest and stomach: the unidentified energy that powered the armor. It flared white, and blue sparks coruscated around the outside of the crystal, as the armor absorbed Storm's blast and, Wolverine had no doubt, converted it into a useable form. He was gratified to see, however, that Fitzroy winced beneath his transparent helmet. Something had gotten through.

Two mercenaries reached up and seized Storm's ankles, dragging her down. She whipped up a wind to unbalance them, and to steady herself so she could land on her feet and face them squarely. But Fitzroy was free now, and—as if at a prearranged signal—six agents piled on top of Wolverine at once, and effectively blocked their leader from his view.

He shrugged them off within seconds, but by then Fitzroy was upon him. A golden gauntlet clamped onto his shoulder, and he found himself staring into the eyes of a lunatic. He could already feel himself weakening. Even through the armor, Fitzroy was draining his life force. He felt as if he had been fighting for hours, and his eyelids were beginning to droop. He had to break Fitzroy's hold now, while he still had some strength left.

He hacked at the armor with his claws, but they slid off without leaving a scratch. He aimed his next blow at Fitzroy's head—and, although this was repelled too, the young mutant recoiled instinctively. Wolverine shifted his weight and twisted, wrapped his hands around the giant metal fingers that held him and pried them apart, at the same time bringing up a foot and bracing it against Fitzroy's broad, crystalline chest-plate. He succeeded in levering himself out of his foe's deadly grip. He fell ungracefully, and his shoulder hurt like hell, but the drain had stopped. He was dizzy, and he wanted nothing more than to sleep, but Fitzroy was coming for him again, and the mercenaries were blocking his escape route.

Wolverine barged through them, as fast as he could, not caring where his claws landed in the process. He saw a desk and leapt onto it, scattering papers and, in one fluid motion, scooping up a chair and bringing it down onto an agent's head, rendering him unconscious. A hail of bullets came his way, but he leapt over them, and Storm quickly dispensed with his attacker, blowing him backwards into a wall.

The agents were all down now. Only Fitzroy remained. He stood with his back to the crackling disc of energy through which he had arrived, and his expression had lost none of its confidence. "I can deal with this jerk," said Wolverine, adjusting his stance on the desk and squaring up to his opponent. "Go answer that distress call; see what's up with the others."

Storm hesitated. "Are you sure?"

“Positive!”

“Yeah, right,” scoffed Fitzroy. “I only have to lay one more finger on you, and you’ll shrivel like a prune in the sun!”

“You’re forgetting a little something, bub: my mutant healing factor. I’m all done and rested, and ready to kick your butt!” It wasn’t quite true. Wolverine was beginning to feel better, but he was determined not to let Fitzroy know how weak he still was.

Storm glanced at both men, then made her decision and flew out through the pane of the window that her lightning bolt had shattered.

“Ready to dance this dance again then, are we, old bean?” Fitzroy taunted, in his cultured English accent. He circled Wolverine slowly, looking for an opportunity to pounce.

Wolverine showed him his claws, warning him off. He needed more time. “Think you can go the distance, Fitzroy? You ain’t nothing but an upstart kid, cowering behind your toys.”

“Do your worst. This bio-armor’s constructed from omnium mesh. It’s a hundred years ahead of your time; same as I am, old man!”

“If you were such a big shot in your own time,” snarled Wolverine, “you wouldn’t’ve come running to this one. You think your gizmos make you something special in the twenty-first centuiy, kid? Think again! You’re nothing but a snot-nosed punk, wherever you end up.”

“I can still give you a lesson in manners, you psychotic midget!”

Fitzroy had fallen for the distraction, talking when he should have attacked. Wolverine was fully recovered now. Not only that, but his enemy’s expression was priceless. He had the quick temper of immaturity, and he had let himself become riled. A cruel grin spread across Wolverine’s face, and he added: “You ain’t even learned how to grow facial

hair yet. Time for your first razor, bub; get that green fluff off your chin!"

It might have been a childish insult, but it worked. With a yell of fury, Fitzroy powered his armor across the room, his hands outstretched to wrap around his tormentor's throat. Wolverine was ready for him.

Fitzroy probably expected his target to try to avoid him. Instead, Wolverine counterattacked. The two deadly foes collided in midair, and hit the ground fighting.

Rogue's urgent, less than ladylike departure from the ballroom drew a few bemused looks and raised eyebrows from the other patrons. They were nothing, however, compared to the expressions of the two bouncers in the corridor outside, as the Southern X-Man literally flew at them. She downed them with simultaneous punches to the jaws, before they could raise the alarm. She touched down and paused for a second, listening. A loud crash resounded from a nearby side passage. Rogue kicked off her high heels, hitched up her impractical skirt and ran towards the source of the disturbance.

A second crash pinpointed the exact room. She shoulder-charged the door without hesitation, taking it not only off its latch but off its hinges too. It thudded to the ground, and Rogue felt foolish, in the sudden silence that followed, standing in the doorway in her fancy clothing, with her hair tumbling over her face.

The albino woman in the red outfit seemed amused. "An associate of yours, I take it?"

Nightcrawler grinned awkwardly. "Ah, yes. Scribe, allow me to introduce Rogue."

Rogue took a step into the room, confused and wary. "What's going on, Kurt?"

"I must apologize. I called for assistance a little prematurely. As you can see, everything is under control now." Nightcrawler indicated the two Hellfire Club agents who were sprawled, unconscious, on the floor. There had

obviously been a fight here: chairs had been overturned, and books pulled from the shelves.

“And who’s the lady? Call me a cynic, but I can’t help noticing that clasp at her neck: you know, the one with the trident symbol that looks mighty familiar.”

Scribe pursed her scarlet-painted lips into a smile, which was presumably meant to be friendly. However, her keen eyes continued to stare at the new arrival, and Rogue had the uncomfortable feeling of being sized up. “I don’t blame you for being suspicious,” said Scribe. “And indeed you are correct, I am a member of the Hellfire Club.”

Rogue clicked her fingers, as well as she could through her gloves. “I remember the name now. Scribe. You were with the English branch. Their paper-pusher, weren’t you?”

“I am the Red Rook of London’s Inner Circle,” said Scribe, with a hint of irritation.

Rogue ventured further into the room, making her way towards Nightcrawler but taking the long route. She kept her eyes firmly on Scribe as she circled her, alert for any hint of deception. She didn’t know what it was exactly, but there was something about this woman that made Rogue distrust her. “I thought the English club went bust,” she said. “Must be an awful bore for y’all, a Red Rook without a chessboard to play on. So, what’s the skinny? You taking sides with the Black King now?”

“As a temporary measure, until I take my rightful place among the new red royalty.”

Nightcrawler shot her a glance. “Although you could say that Scribe is playing for both sides already. She and I have come to an understanding.”

“Uh-huh. That sounds like the Hellfire Club: so used to acting like snakes that they can’t even trust each other. Not like the X-Men, eh, ‘Nightcrawler’?”

It had taken her a while to work it out, but in the end she was just fast enough. Nightcrawler-if that’s who he truly was-leapt at her, but Rogue took him by surprise. She

plucked him out of the air and hurled him at Scribe. With dazzling speed, Scribe ducked beneath the human projectile and sprang towards Rogue, her fingers outstretched. Rogue put up an arm to protect her face. Scribe cut through her sleeve, but seemed to realize that she ought not to touch the exposed skin beneath. Rogue, in turn, tried to land punch after punch, but Scribe ducked and feinted and avoided each one, as if performing a speeded-up dance.

"Your instincts are good, I'll give you that," said Scribe. "What gave us away?"

"Whoever your friend is," Rogue grunted, "he does a lousy German accent."

Scribe was too fast for Rogue, and Rogue too tough for Scribe. They could have kept up this pointless battle all day, neither hurting the other. But Rogue realized that Scribe was just trying to keep her occupied, to distract her from the real danger. She forced herself to ignore the Red Rook, to look for whoever or whatever was in Nightcrawler's form. She had thrown him into a wall, stunning him, but he was already getting to his feet again.

She barreled towards him, not caring if Scribe was in her way or not, and caught him in the midriff. He hit the wall again, the breath knocked out of him. Rogue drew back a fist to send him down for the count, but hesitated at the thought of striking a friend. 'Nightcrawler' could have been a simulacrum, of course, or a shape-changer, but she was beginning to recall what little she had read about Scribe in the X-Men's files, and she knew she had previously worked with a man who could possess the bodies of others.

"You've realized the truth, haven't you?" her enemy taunted her, his English accent sounding strange in Kurt Wagner's voice. "Mountjoy's the name, and I'm in the driving seat of this body at the moment. You can't hurt me without hurting your teammate."

Rogue gritted her teeth. "If you're still in there, Kurt, I'm sorry about this. Truly, I am."

But then, before she could hit him, Scribe jumped onto her back and snatched the glove from her upraised fist.

It took Rogue a second to work out what to do next. She shifted her aim, intending to hit Nightcrawler's body in the stomach, where his costume would protect him-protect them both-from the danger that her skin posed. By that time, it was too late.

He teleported away, leaving Rogue facing a blank wall and engulfed in a cloud of sulphurous smoke. Disoriented, she turned around ... and recoiled, shocked to find Nightcrawler's face an inch from hers. He grinned at her, wrapped his hands around her head, pulled her closer and locked his lips to hers.

Rogue's eyes widened in horror. She tried to push him away, to break the deadly kiss, but she could already feel the change, weakening them both, and Kurt Wagner-the real Kurt Wagner-was inside her mind, screaming: *Don't worry about me, meine Freundin, just get him away from you!* He was trying not to fight her, to be as supportive as he could, but it didn't make the situation any easier to cope with. In that frenetic, dazed, upside-down moment, Rogue still couldn't tell which thoughts were his and which hers.

She screamed, and Nightcrawler was screaming too. As her vision blurred, she put everything she had into one powerful punch, hoping Kurt could forgive her, knowing they had already held onto each other for far too long. She was vaguely aware of the spectral form of a bearded man in a brown suit, fleeing from Nightcrawler's body as it crumpled to the floor. She prayed she hadn't harmed her friend too badly. She was on the floor herself, although she didn't remember falling. Her head was a mass of pain and, as she tried to focus on the carpet beneath her hands and knees, she saw that her skin had turned indigo blue.

"Very neat," said a man's voice: Mountjoy's, it had to be. "The X-Men defeat each other. So, what do we do with them now?"

“You heard Fitzroy’s orders,” said Scribe. “We kill them!”

And at that point, despite her best efforts, Rogue blacked out, her last coherent thought being to wonder why nobody else had answered Nightcrawler’s emergency signal.

There weren’t many lights on at the back of the Hellfire Club building, so Storm picked an illuminated window at random and struck it with a lightning bolt, blowing out the glass. A fierce gust of wind whipped the blinds up and inwards, out of her way, as she spread out her cloak behind her and glided smoothly through her makeshift entrance.

She had picked the wrong room. A middle-aged man in the seventeenth-century costume of the club’s elite leapt out of his chair and cowered behind his desk, knocking over a bottle of malt whiskey in the process. Without so much as an apology for the intrusion, Storm hurried past him, pulled open the door and emerged into the corridor beyond.

A short way to her left, a rectangle of electric light spilled onto the carpet, and she could hear voices. She ran in that direction, and arrived in the doorway of a richly furnished office to find Nightcrawler and Rogue lying in the debris of a recent battle.

She took in the situation at a glance. Nightcrawler was unconscious, lying next to the wall at an awkward angle, blood trickling from a cut to his temple. Rogue’s eyes were closed too, and she moaned fitfully to herself. Her skin was dark blue, and she sported a tail. Storm always made a point of keeping herself up to date with the X-Men’s many foes, so she immediately recognized the man and the woman who had defeated her teammates. Scribe had a machine-gun: standard club issue, probably taken from one of the two agents who were also present and down. She was standing over Nightcrawler, pressing the muzzle of the weapon to his head. Mountjoy was watching, evidently enjoying the prospect of an execution.

“Get away from him, Scribe!” bellowed Storm. Even before she spoke, she had summoned a wind, which howled

through the confines of the office and snatched the lightweight gun out of Scribe's hands. But Scribe reacted so quickly that she was upon Storm before she had even completed the command. She wrestled with her foe, obviously realizing that the wind-rider's powers were little use to her at such close range. Storm, however, had also realized this long ago, and had trained extensively in hand-to-hand combat. She broke Scribe's hold and seized her wrist, twisting it around behind her back and forcing the scarlet-clad villain down onto her knees. At the same time, she blew Mountjoy away—knowing that, if he touched her, the fight was over—and created a localized rain shower over Nightcrawler's head, hoping he wasn't so injured that a splash of cold water wouldn't revive him.

Scribe twisted out of Storm's grip, and coiled a foot around her leg, almost tripping her. While the X-Man was still off-balance, her foe punched her in the face, and dodged out of the way of her counterattack. "You bitch," she snarled, "you won't lay a hand on me again!" She slashed at Storm's cheek with her fingernails, leaving four shallow cuts.

Storm didn't respond to the threat. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on the air around her, sensing its currents and merging a part of her mind with them, coaxing them, guiding them and ultimately controlling them. Scribe broke off her attack, her white hair whipping around her face, as a veritable tornado sprang up inside Sebastian Shaw's office, with her at its epicenter. Papers, books, and—as the winds picked up—even furniture were scattered. Buffeted from all sides, Scribe did her best to remain standing, and even to press her attack. But, as good as her reflexes were, she couldn't possibly react to every sudden change in the wind's direction—unlike her opponent, who knew about each one in advance.

As Scribe lost her footing, Storm marched towards her. The Red Rook saw her coming and tried to back away, but she was blown instead into the X-Man's arms. Storm

punched her—once, twice, three times—until her knees buckled and she fell. Then, the wind-rider allowed her miniature tornado to die down, and looked for Mountjoy.

She didn't see him. But Rogue—still exhibiting some of Nightcrawler's external characteristics—was on her feet now, facing her, and it only took a second for Ororo to realize that something was wrong. Something about her posture that was unfamiliar.

"Bright lady," she breathed in horror, "please, no!"

'Rogue' grinned, and slowly, deliberately, removed her remaining glove. "You know," said Mountjoy, in the voice of Storm's friend and teammate, "this body is just bursting with power. I've never felt anything quite like it. What a pity, then, that the mind of its real owner can't cope. While Rogue curls herself into a metaphorical ball and shuts herself off from the world, I can make full use of her abilities. I don't have to hold myself back for fear of what it might do to your poor friend's fragile psyche. I only have to touch you, Storm."

"I won't let you," said Storm, defiantly.

"Ah, but won't you indeed? This body is strong. Can you stop me without destroying it?"

"Rogue would want me to try!" Storm was already preparing to summon a lightning bolt, knowing that nothing less would penetrate Rogue's hide, fearing that what Mountjoy said could well be true.

"Might not be necessary, sugar," said Rogue—and Storm saw that a change had suddenly come over her. She seemed weaker. Her face was contorted with pain and she was clenching her fists and shaking as if engaged in some titanic inner struggle. Not only that, but her voice had regained its familiar Southern lilt. This could be a trick on Mountjoy's part, but Storm doubted it. Rogue was fighting him for control of her body.

For an instant, Rogue looked scared, and Mountjoy's English accent emerged from her mouth again. "What are

you doing? This is impossible! You can't—!" Then, as if a switch had been thrown, Rogue was back. "Can't I? You made a mistake, Mountjoy. To take over my body, you had to touch me first. Even as you wormed your way in here, I absorbed a measure of your powers. You tried to take me over..."

Storm watched the bizarre battle, helpless to intervene. She gasped as her teammate's form altered again, her features lengthening, hair appearing on her chin, her very clothes darkening and changing shape until, in appearance at least, she was more Mountjoy than Rogue. But it was certainly Rogue who put the look of grim satisfaction on the combined entity's face and, using its mouth, completed her sentence: "Now, I'm taking *you* over!"

But the fight wasn't over yet. As Rogue's features began to reassert themselves, she turned to Storm and, rigid with effort, grunted: "Ororo, I can't hold him much longer. Take 'Crawler and get out of here. I'll follow you. Go!"

Nightcrawler was beginning to come round, but so was Scribe. Storm gathered up the injured X-Man and made for the window-but, groggy as he was, Kurt struggled in her arms. She let him go, and he practically fell on top of Shaw's computer, which had been blown off the desk and was lying on the floor, the screen of its monitor broken. He took a CD out of its drive, and grinned weakly. "Don't know what's on here, but it's something, right?" Then he fell against Storm, and lost consciousness again.

Wolverine was running rings around Fitzroy. He gave himself over to his animal instincts, letting them tell him when to attack and when to withdraw. He couldn't cut through the young mutant's armor, but he could use strength and leverage against him. He had brought Fitzroy crashing down to the floor four times already. Each time, he had swooped in and made an attempt to pry his omnium mesh helmet from his head. He hadn't been successful yet, but he figured he had at least loosened it.

Fitzroy, in turn, had punched him, head-butted him and tried with all his might to maintain a hold upon his slippery foe. He had probably drained enough energy from Wolverine to power a small town for a month. As long as he took it in small enough doses for the Canadian X-Man to recover between each one-and as long as he couldn't use the energy offensively-Wolverine didn't care too much. But he remained aware that, were Fitzroy to get a proper grip on him for any length of time, then that would be the end of him. It made for a long, grinding battle, but Wolverine took consolation in the certainty that, even with his efforts magnified by his bio-armor, his opponent had to be feeling the strain more than he was.

Inevitably, Fitzroy made another mistake. He cursed as he was outmaneuvered and knocked off his feet, gravity and his heavy shell doing the rest. Wolverine was upon him again before he could stand, searching with his claws for a seam in his armor. He grunted with satisfaction as he found one. With the sound of wrenching metal, the helmet came off at last.

By that time, Fitzroy had reached up and seized both of Wolverine's wrists.

They glared into each other's eyes. Sweat was pouring down Fitzroy's face, but his expression was exultant. "You came too close, X-Man. You're dead, now!"

"Wanna bet, bub?"

Wolverine could feel his life force fading, and see it crackling inside Fitzroy's chest-plate. The powered grips of two armored hands would be difficult to break, perhaps impossible. But there was another way.

He retracted his claws and pushed down with all his strength. Fitzroy, who had expected him to try to pull away, was taken by surprise. Suddenly, Wolverine's fists were resting on his face-and the metal claw housings that were built into his gloves were pointing squarely at his eyes. "You just saw what adamantium can do to omnium mesh," he

growled. "What do you think it can do to you?" Fitzroy set his jaw defiantly, so Wolverine spelled out his threat: "Give up now, or I'll dig my way into your brain, by the messy route! Better believe I can kill you before you can kill me."

"OK, OK, I give!" whined Fitzroy, sounding like a child.

"That's a good boy," said Wolverine. He could already feel his body repairing the damage, restoring him to health. "Now, since you're in such an obliging mood, I've got a few questions to ask you-about your boss, and a certain friend of mine."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You'll have to do better than that, Trev."

Fitzroy spat in his interrogator's face. Wolverine snarled, and considered popping his claws after all.

But suddenly, all hell broke loose. A familiar *bamf* heralded an unexpected arrival. A blueskinned Rogue teleported into the room, and crumpled to the floor with a cry of: "Logan, help me!" At the same time, a Hellfire Club goon leapt up from his prone position, picked up a chair and hurled it at Wolverine's head. Wolverine caught it, and sent the impromptu missile back the way it had come, but Fitzroy used the twin distraction. He pushed up hard, throwing the X-Man away from him and climbing back to his feet. He hesitated, as if wondering whether to attack again or just cut his losses. His decision was made easier as Storm swept into the office, carrying an unconscious Nightcrawler. Fitzroy dived through his dimensional portal and disappeared. Infuriated, and scenting blood, Wolverine made to follow-but his instincts told him better. He drew back, as the portal suddenly snapped shut: a deliberate attempt on the White Rook's part to cut any pursuers in half.

"Next time, Fitzroy," Wolverine muttered under his breath. "Next time!"

Now that the battle was over, a sudden silence descended upon the room. The sounds of laughter drifted up from the street below, and Wolverine's keen hearing picked

out the muted strains of orchestral music from inside the Hellfire Club's ballroom. He could make out something else too: police sirens, approaching.

He hurried to Rogue's side. She was hunched into a ball, cradling her knees in her arms. He knew what had happened to her, just as he knew that there was nothing he could do to help. "You all right, darling?" he asked.

She looked up at him, and nodded bravely. "Too many stray thoughts whizzing about this old head of mine, that's all."

"And Mountjoy?" asked Storm.

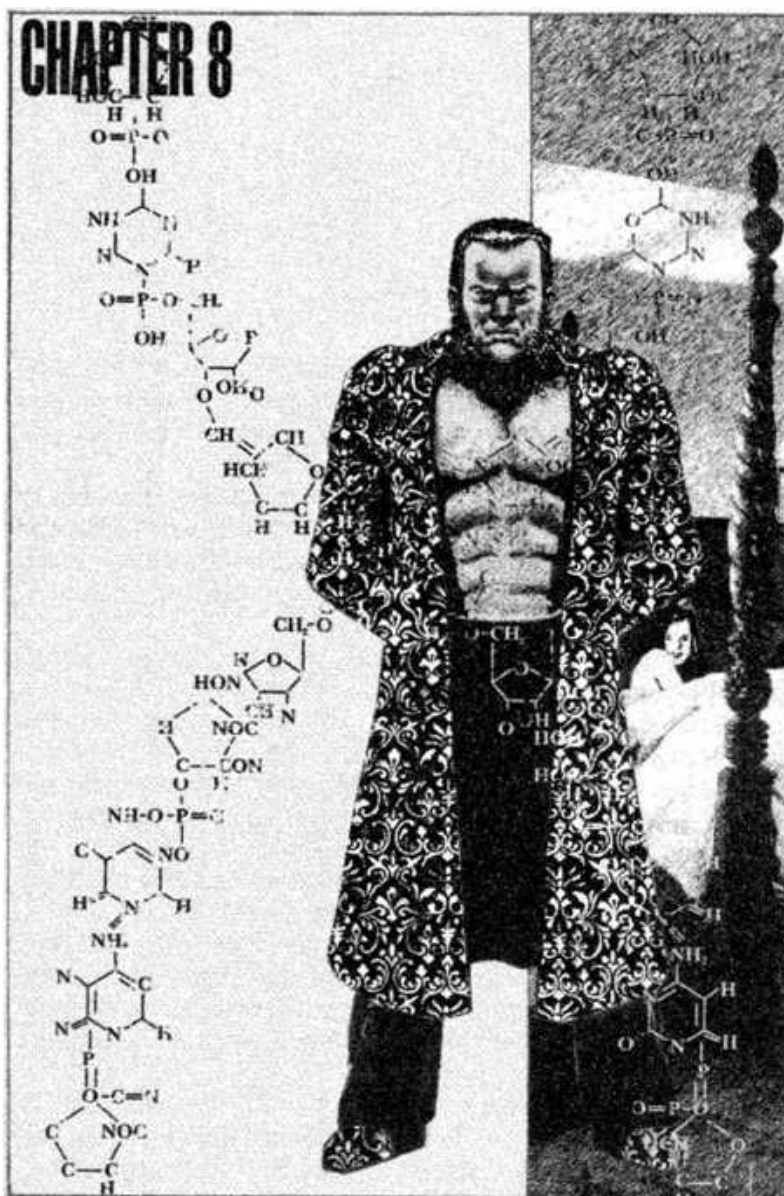
"Gave up the ghost, so to speak. Soon as he got out of my body, I used Nightcrawler's power to 'port out of there. How is the elf? I'm afraid I hit him pretty hard."

"Concussed," said Storm. "He needs rest, but I don't think there's any serious damage. And he got what we came for." Wolverine could see that, even in his sleep, Nightcrawler was holding fiercely on to a compact disk.

"Time to beat a retreat then," he said. The sirens were louder now,

and he could see from Storm's reaction that she could hear them too. "I think those cop cars are coming our way. We've attracted attention." "And, since our raid on the Hellfire Club building wasn't exactly legal..."

"Took the words right out of my mouth, 'Ro. Let's get our butts out of here!"



THE X-MEN'S Blackbird had always been fast-but, since it had been modified with alien technology, its speed was almost unbe—

lievable. For Hank McCoy, however, the journey to China was

still too slow. It gave him too much time to think.

"You, most of all, are looking for answers," Selene had said to him, "but you'd prefer not to find them here." His fellow X-Men had been discreet enough not to question him

about what she had meant, later. But, much as he was loath to admit it to himself, she had been right.

Selene had been toying with them all, of course. She had promised to tell them what she knew of Moira's whereabouts. Then, with a cruel smile, she had announced: "Nothing. I know nothing." And she had broken into peals of laughter, which had soon subsided beneath Cyclops's glare. She had become thoughtful, then. "However, I am somewhat intrigued. Could it be that an old and trusted friend is keeping secrets from me?"

Hank's heart had leapt at that. He knew how deceitful the Black Queen could be—but, even so, he had believed her without question. And more: he had felt a tingle of excitement-of hope?-at the suggestion that this 'old and trusted friend' (and how many people could that be? Even the hint of sarcasm with which Selene had spoken the words pointed towards one associate in particular) could be the true culprit in all this.

Storm had contacted them, back at the X-Mansion, and her report had all but confirmed it. She had described how her team had battled the Hellfire Club in Hong Kong, and how Nightcrawler had escaped with half the contents of Sebastian Shaw's hard disk. Analysis of the data had revealed something interesting: that only a few days earlier, Shaw had deleted the schematics of Muir Island's security systems from his computer. It was enough to tie him in with Moira's abduction.

And so the X-Men had agreed to reunite in Hong Kong, to ponder their next move. In other circumstances, Hank might almost have welcomed the prospect of a forthcoming battle. It might have taken his mind off his problems. But why did Moira have to be involved?

It was sometimes easy to forget that Moira MacTaggart had the Legacy Virus herself. She faced her illness with a brave face and a determination to fight that was typical of her. Still, however bad Hank felt about his failure to find a

cure, it had to be ten times worse for her. And he knew that, for each minute she was missing, each minute he spent searching for her, another minute passed during which no progress was made towards their goal. He felt sick to think of all that wasted time, of Moira's life-and how many others?—ticking away. And that made him feel guilty, because he knew he could have entrusted this rescue mission to the others. He could have returned to his work on Muir Island.

But there was a small part of Hank McCoy—a part he tried not to acknowledge, because it offered a hope that might be too cruelly dashed, and because he felt guilty about this too—which spoke to him of greater possibilities.

He had known for a long time that Shaw, like him, was trying to cure the Legacy Virus. If he had taken to acquiring geneticists, then there had to be a connection. But then, why attract the X-Men's attention by going after one of their associates? And why now?

"Your hopes are high," Selene had said, "but your fears are still greater."

What if the Hellfire Club had made a breakthrough?

Phoenix had taken the controls from Storm, to give her a rest. The African X-Man had already flown eight thousand miles to collect her teammates. She lay back in her reclined seat, her eyes closed—although she couldn't have been asleep, as the instruments showed that the Blackbird was still benefiting from an artificial tailwind.

Cyclops and the Beast were lost in their own maudlin thoughts, Cyclops staring out of the window in a futile attempt to prevent his wife from seeing how worried he was. Jean had to admit that she had spent most of the journey in subdued silence herself. The despondent air in the cabin had even rubbed off on Iceman: he sat and fidgeted restlessly, sensing the mood of the others and not wishing to disturb their reveries.

Jean didn't have to read Hank's mind to know that the Legacy Virus was at its forefront. As for Scott... well, his

thoughts were an open book to her at the best of times. Right now, she could be sure beyond a doubt that they were thinking about the same thing.

Or rather, about the same person.

Once, back in the days when Jean Grey had been known as Marvel Girl, she had made a deal with a powerful cosmic entity. In return for her own survival when she ought to have died, she had allowed it to replace her temporarily on Earth. The Phoenix force had wanted to learn humanity, but instead-and with Sebastian Shaw's help-it had become a monster. It had saved the entire universe—but then it had destroyed a sun, and killed billions. It had learned something from its human host, though. In the end, it had taken its own life, to spare others. And, for a time, Jean Grey had been believed dead and buried.

That was when Scott Summers, still in mourning, had met Madelyne Pryor.

In some ways, it was flattering that, with Jean gone, Scott had fallen for a woman who looked almost exactly like her. But it was also somehow creepy, and neither Jean nor Scott liked to think about that chapter of his life. Madelyne was a pilot who had crashed her plane on the very day-at the exact moment-that the Phoenix, in Jean Grey's form, had died on the moon. She had walked out of the flames unharmed, with no memory of her life before the accident. To Scott, she must have seemed like his lost love reincarnated. In a way, she had been. He hadn't known it at the time, but she was a clone of Jean, created by the X-Men's old foe Mr. Sinister, as part of one of his typically Machiavellian plots.

After a whirlwind romance, Scott had married Madelyne. They had had a son, but he had been taken from them. They had been through a lot together.

And then Jean had returned.

Perhaps Madelyne had good reason to feel bitter towards the couple. Jean knew that Scott wasn't proud of the way he

had treated his first wife during that difficult time. He had just found out that the only woman he had ever truly loved had apparently risen from the grave. He had seen at last that Madelyne Pryor had been nothing but a confused attempt on his part to replace her, to hold on to a part of Jean Grey forever.

But Madelyne wasn't Jean, and her hurt had festered and turned into hatred, and her hatred into madness. Jean and Scott still felt guilty about what they had put her through. But their guilt had been, in some small measure, assuaged by Madelyne's transformation into the Goblin Queen, which had proved her to be an imperfect reflection-a distortion rather than a copy, with a dark side that could never have been born of Jean herself.

Just like the Phoenix.

Madelyne was a member of the Hellfire Club now, a part of the Hong Kong Inner Circle-and, if the rumors were true, Sebastian Shaw's partner in more than one sense of the word. Storm's team hadn't reported meeting her in Hong Kong, but she would certainly be with the Black King somewhere, plotting and waiting for a chance to exact revenge upon the people who had wronged her. Her very presence would stir up feelings that both Jean and Scott had hoped to forget, and force them to confront a past they had thought long buried.

To a casual observer, it might have seemed like a ghost was operating the laptop computer.

The Hong Kong hotel room was in semi-darkness. A night breeze drifted through the open window, and made the blinds tap against the sill as if sending out a message in Morse code. The main source of light was the small screen, over which Nightcrawler hunched, parts of his body washed in color while other parts faded into the shadows.

Wolverine lay on his back, still wearing the lower half of his costume, on one of the two beds. From the regular

rhythm of his breathing, Nightcrawler had assumed he was sleeping. He was surprised, then, to hear his voice.

"Shouldn't you be getting some rest?" asked Logan, disapprovingly.

"I had a few hours' sleep before we flew out here. I'm OK."

"Rogue hit you pretty hard-and it's likely we'll be facing off against the Hellfire Club again tomorrow. Think how she'll feel if you keel over as soon as the fists start flying."

"I told you, I'm OK. Anyway, Rogue did the right thing."

"Try telling her that."

"I already have. Mountjoy wasn't about to let either of us go. If she hadn't punched me, I don't know what would have happened. I could have ended up like ..." Kurt didn't want to complete the sentence. Lamely, he finished: "You know."

"Like Carol Danvers," said Wolverine, never one to shy away from words.

Nightcrawler sighed, and turned away from the screen, his eyes adjusting quickly to the darkness of the rest of the room. His teammate, he saw, hadn't changed his position, hadn't even opened his eyes. "You're probably right, mein Freund," he conceded. A set of squared-off numbers shone from a digital clock radio between the beds. It was later than he had thought. "I thought I'd found something else in the data we salvaged from Shaw's computer."

"Like what?"

"Like a heavily encrypted communications link. I can't trace it, though. I can't even reconstruct any of the incoming messages. They've been very efficiently purged."

"Don't sweat it. A man like Shaw knows plenty of people. Doesn't mean to say they're all involved in whatever he's got his fingers into right now."

"I suppose not," said Nightcrawler. "At least we know now that he was interested in Moira. Chances are, he has her and the rest of the missing scientists. If only we knew where ..."

“Get some rest,” said Wolverine. “The rest of the team’ll be here in a few hours, and then we can talk about rounding up Fitzroy and his pals and beating the information out of them.”

“Come back to bed, Sebastian.”

Shaw hadn’t realized that Madelyne was awake. He had been pacing fretfully in his dressing gown, feeling confined in the small, basic quarters that were so much less than he was used to. There were no windows in this underground room, only a subdued artificial light. Not that the discomfort bothered him too much. He had bigger problems.

He looked at Madelyne, thin sheets clinging to the curves of her body, long red hair flattened by the pillow so that it seemed to form a halo around her beautiful face. She was a most enchanting diversion. But even she couldn’t divert him from his worries tonight. “You’re brooding about Doctor MacTaggart, aren’t you?”

He climbed back onto the bed beside her, and raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “The perils of living with a telepath, I suppose.”

“Of living with a woman, Sebastian. I don’t need to read your mind when I can simply read your face.”

He smiled demurely, and wondered if she was lying to him. He had put the question to her deliberately, as a test. Fond as he had become of his Black Rook, he knew he couldn’t trust her. He had learned through bitter experience never to trust anyone.

“I misjudged her,” he confessed. “I knew she was stubborn, but...” He sighed. “Perhaps I should have heeded the advice I was given. Perhaps I should have been patient. I have some of the best people in the world working for me—but somebody like MacTaggart, somebody with her insights and skills, could have guaranteed our success.”

“I can change her mind,” said Madelyne.

“I doubt that very much,” said Shaw. “She’s already dying from the Legacy Virus. What more could any of us do

to her?"

"Make sure it hurts!"

"She would still resist, spitfire. I was sure I could reach her. Our facility here offers the good doctor her best chance of survival. I believed that when she realized this, she would join us." Shaw clenched his fists in frustration. He had offered the Scots woman everything she could have desired: achievement, recognition, life itself. He couldn't understand the mentality of somebody who would turn down all that on a point of principle.

But then, he had always found it difficult to understand others. Because of this, and because of the circles within which he moved, he had found himself betrayed on many occasions. He surrounded himself with people who could further his cause, regardless of the fact that such people were likely to have their own agendas. *Keep your friends close*, said the old adage by which Shaw lived, *and your enemies closer*. That was why he didn't-couldn't-trust Madelyne. That was why he suspected Selene's motives for striking out on her own, without his sanction, and taking over the New York branch. She hadn't opened hostilities against him yet, but he would have been a fool if he hadn't prepared himself for that possibility. And were the Black King and the Black Queen to go to war again, then not all of the other pieces would choose his side. Trevor Fitzroy, in particular, was surely only biding his time until his mistress summoned him.

The game was falling apart around him.

"Everybody can be bought," said Madelyne, leaving Shaw to wonder again if she had been eavesdropping on his thoughts. "I can look into her mind if you want, see what she truly desires. If she has a price, I can find it."

"Maybe," he said, thoughtfully.

"Where is she now?"

“In a bunkroom. I want her treated well, for now. I will talk to her again tomorrow. Perhaps she can still be persuaded.” He didn’t really believe it, though. He rolled onto his back and rested his head on the soft pillow. His dressing gown fell open, and Madelyne drew closer to him, and ran a hand over his exposed chest. Shaw didn’t respond to her touch. “We’re running out of time, Madelyne,” he said quietly.

“By moving against Doctor MacTaggert, we’ve attracted the attention of the X-Men.” "

“Fitzroy’s letter?”

He nodded. He had prohibited all radio contact between this facility and his headquarters on the mainland. But, just a few hours ago, a tiny wormhole had popped into existence in his office here, above his desk, and a note from his White Rook had been pushed through. The X-Men had been sniffing around in Hong Kong. Fitzroy was sure they had learned nothing, but Shaw knew his old enemies better. They would be arriving on his doorstep before long.

“We can defeat the X-Men,” said Madelyne, seeming to relish the prospect of a fight.

“And keep the project safe in the process?”

“It means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

“Far more than anything else.”

He didn’t want to talk about it any more, so he turned his back towards her. A second later, however, he felt Madelyne’s breath upon his neck, and her hands massaging the tension-knotted muscles of his shoulders. He was irritated, at first, by her insistence upon invading his personal space. But the sensation was a pleasant one, and he found himself smiling as a weight lifted from him. She was a very enchanting diversion after all.

It took him a minute to realize that she had invaded his head too. She was massaging his mind as she massaged his body, relaxing him and pushing his worries away. But, by this time, he didn’t care much any more.

He drifted towards sleep, idly wondering if Madelyne knew that he didn't love her.

"I don't think we have much choice," said Cyclops. "The Hellfire Club know we're in Hong Kong, and we can be fairly sure they have Moira, but we don't know where."

"So, we make them tell us," said Wolverine.

Cyclops nodded. "I think we have to take the offensive, yes." Seven X-Men, dressed in civilian clothing, were eating breakfast in a quiet corner of a small cafeteria, a block away from the hotel in which three of their number had spent the night. Only the Beast was not present. Upon arrival in Hong Kong, he had professed himself to be dog-tired. The strains of the past week or so were beginning to tell, from working through nights on his ultimately abortive cure for the Legacy Virus, to lying awake and worrying about Moira. He had decided to skip the planning session, crashing down in Wolverine and Nightcrawler's room for a few hours, and asking Cyclops to fill him in later on what had been decided.

"We already know that Fitzroy, Scribe and Mountjoy are likely to be present," Scott continued. Storm had briefed the rest of the team on the previous night's events. "Rogue, I hate to ask you this, but I think you're our best chance against Mountjoy. After last time, he should think twice about using his power against you. You need to hit him hard and fast, get him out of the picture before he can get his hands on anyone else."

Rogue nodded. "I can do that, with pleasure."

"What if he's already hiding inside someone again?" asked Nightcrawler.

"I'll perform a telepathic sweep as soon as we're inside the building," said Phoenix. "By all accounts, Mountjoy doesn't control the mind of his host; I should be able to detect both his thoughts and theirs, as two separate patterns. I'll point him out to Rogue."

"Against Scribe," said Cyclops, "we need a good hand-to-hand fighter, someone who can match her reflexes."

Wolverine ...”

Wolverine shook his head. “Got me a score to settle with Fitzroy. He’s mine!”

Cyclops scowled, and was about to remind Logan once again who was leading the X-Men when Nightcrawler jumped in to defuse the situation: “Scribe should be easy enough to deal with, if we double-team her. I can keep her busy while Bobby piles ice around her feet. That should slow her down.”

“Suits me,” said Iceman.

Cyclops decided not to make an issue of Wolverine’s intransigence, this time. “Which leaves the rest of us to deal with however many mercenaries the Hellfire Club can throw at us,” he said, “keep them off the others’ backs while they handle the big guns.”

“Gave yourself the easy job, I see, boss-man,” remarked Wolverine. “Should be like shooting fish in a barrel.” Cyclops ignored him. He was only trying to provoke a reaction.

“However,” he continued, “we should be aware that Fitzroy has had plenty of time to call in reinforcements by now.”

“Sebastian Shaw,” said Phoenix, unhappily.

“Shaw likes to remain in the background,” said Storm. “He doesn’t usually involve himself in combat situations. If he does, however, then I believe I can handle him. He may have the ability to absorb kinetic force, but I can strike him with electrical energy.” “Makes sense,” said Cyclops. “But if Shaw does turn up, he might have his personal assistant, Tessa, with him. She isn’t one for brawling either, but we have to be prepared. She might decide to make an exception.”

“Tessa’s psi-powers are no match for my own,” said Phoenix. “If it comes to a battle between us, I can take her. But I suspect I’ll have other problems.” She said the words with a hint of resignation, and Scott’s heart ached to hear them. He looked at his wife, and she smiled back at him

bravely. *It's all right, Scott*, she told him, mind to mind. *You can mention her name*. Aloud, for the benefit of the others, she said: "Madelyne Pryor's abilities are equal to my own, but I have the edge in experience. At the very least, I can keep her occupied until the rest of the Lords Cardinal have been dealt with."

"Good for you, Jeannie," said Wolverine. "As for Tessa, she ain't a fighter. Trick with her is to knock her down before she can worm her way into your head."

Cyclops nodded. "If both telepaths are present, Jean, forget Tessa and concentrate on ... Pryor." He had hesitated, just fractionally, before saying her name. She had always been 'Maddie' to him. He hoped the others hadn't noticed, although Jean certainly would have. "In that eventuality, Tessa becomes my responsibility." Wolverine was right: Tessa's threat could be ended with one optic blast, if only he could locate her and strike quickly enough.

"Looks like we got a plan then," said Wolverine. "I vote we strike now. Sooner we do it, the less time those suckers've got to prepare."

"Kurt, can you 'port back to the hotel and wake Hank?" asked Cyclops.

"Jawohl, mein fearless leader," said Nightcrawler, with a mock salute. The others crowded around him, preventing the few other diners in the cafe from seeing as he vanished into thin air. Cyclops couldn't help but wonder, however, what any onlooker might make of the sound and the brimstone smell of his teleportation effect.

The X-Men finished their breakfasts in silence, each lost in his or her own thoughts of the battle to come. Cyclops was playing through various possibilities in his mind, ensuring as far as possible that he was prepared for any eventuality, that he wouldn't lose control.

Then Nightcrawler returned, hurrying through the glass door from the street, still in his Errol Flynn disguise, having apparently teleported back to a discreet spot nearby rather

than risking materializing where he might be seen. And Cyclops could tell, from the expression on his illusory face, that something was wrong. Something for which he hadn't prepared.

"He's gone!" Nightcrawler blurted out in a low voice, as soon as he was near enough to the table for the others to hear. "Hank's gone!"

"What do you mean?" asked Cyclops, urgently.

"He wasn't in the hotel room. And he hasn't been there for the last thirty minutes at least. The beds have been made up, so I checked with the cleaners. They haven't seen hide nor hair of him, no pun intended." "Thirty minutes?" repeated Phoenix.

"More than long enough for him to have joined us here," said Rogue, "and I can't imagine where else he would have gone."

"Ain't it obvious?" grunted Wolverine. "The Hellfire Club are picking us off one by one. Looks like we got us two hostages to rescue now."

The costumed mercenaries were taking no chances. Four of them held on to the Beast, as four more covered him with their guns. They had wrestled him to the floor, but they lifted him to his knees as Trevor Fitzroy entered the Hellfire Club's ballroom, the boots of his bulky bio-armor thudding heavily into the thick carpet. More agents followed at his heels, along with a white-haired woman who could only have been the Red Rook, Scribe.

"Well, well, w^rell, what do we have here?*" said Fitzroy, in a mocking tone. "One of our enemies, delivering himself into my hands. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"You expressed it eloquently enough yourself, Fitzroy," said the Beast. "I came here of my own volition, and allowed your rent-a-mob extras to believe they had overpowered me, because I wished to speak to you. It isn't necessary to engage in heavy-handed tactics."

"I'll be the judge of that, I think. What kind of a trap are you planning to spring here?"

"No trap," the Beast assured him. "I merely want to get a message to your Black King."

"A plea for the return of your associate, no doubt. I don't think so, X-Man. You've got nothing to say to the Lords Cardinal that we want to hear."

"I think we should let Mr. Shaw make that decision for himself," came a new voice.

The Beast recognized the woman known only as Tessa, as she swept into the room. She was young and slight of form, but Hank knew her power resided in her mind, not her body. Her black hair was piled up on top of her head, and she looked the very model of efficiency in a stylish black trouser suit.

"Shaw left me in charge while he was gone," said Fitzroy, pointedly.

"And he sent me to investigate the situation here," countered Tessa. Fitzroy was a member of the Inner Circle, and therefore technically Tessa's superior. Hank wouldn't have guessed it, though, from the young woman's demeanor. She had always been loyal to Sebastian Shaw—almost uniquely so—for as long as the X-Men had known them both. But, increasingly it seemed, she had little time for his associates. The Beast saw the barely disguised contempt in which she held Fitzroy, who was probably a few years her junior. He wondered if he might be able to use that rift against them both in the future.

"The situation," growled Fitzroy, "is that I've fought off the X-Men, as Shaw wanted, and now I've captured one of them. I think I can deal with him myself."

"He's telling the truth, Mr. Fitzroy," said Tessa, scornfully. "I can see it in his mind. He didn't come here to fight. His teammates don't even know where he is." •

"So, we kill him before they find out!"

“They won’t. I’ve constructed a psi-shield around his mind. Even Phoenix won’t be able to detect his thoughts now. Not from a distance. He’s on his own.” As Fitzroy fumed in silence, Tessa stalked across the room and crouched down in front of the Beast, bringing her eyes level with his. “Now, little man, you said you had a message for my employer?”

The Beast returned her stare levelly. “I know what Shaw’s plans are,” he said. He was bluffing: he couldn’t be sure that his deductions were correct.

“Do you indeed? And the X-Men intend to stop him, I suppose?” “Maybe. But, as you have already inferred, I came here without their knowledge, and for an entirely different purpose.”

Tessa grinned unexpectedly. “I know. You’re here because you have come to think as I do: that Sebastian Shaw is mutantkind’s best hope.”

The Beast blanched at this unequivocal statement. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Oh, come now, Doctor McCoy. Does it shock you so much to hear your unspoken thoughts vocalized for the first time?”

She had a point, Hank couldn’t deny it. Like Selene, Tessa had exposed what he was thinking, what he had hardly dared to admit to himself. Ever since his return to Muir Island, ever since he had found both Moira and her files missing, an idea had been building in his mind. A crazy idea; perhaps, in some ways, an unworthy one. But, as each piece of the jigsaw puzzle of Moira’s disappearance had slotted into place, as the schemes of the Hellfire Club had been gradually revealed, it had become more and more natural. More insistent.

A few days ago, he would never have dreamed of coming here like this, of dealing with the X-Men’s enemies. But then, a few days ago, William Montgomery had still been alive.

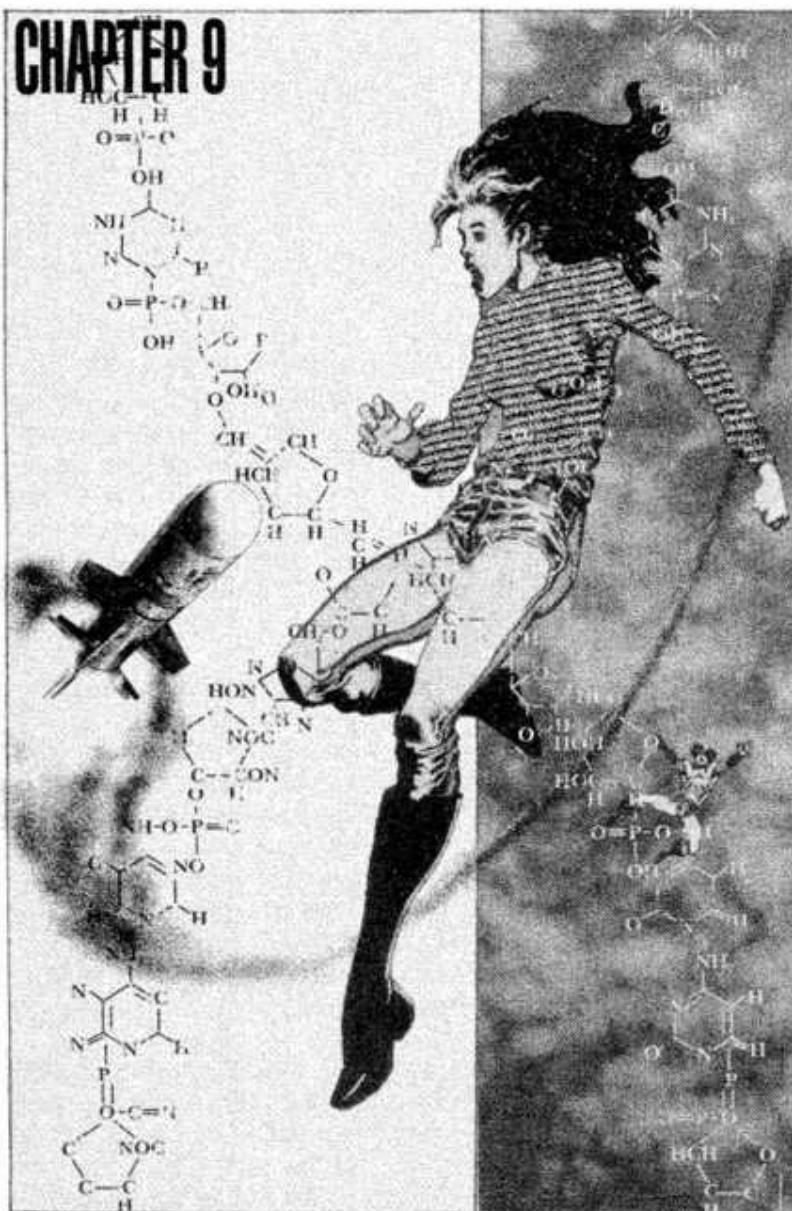
And so, Hank McCoy had walked into the clutches of the Hellfire Club, afraid of being proved wrong, and so ashamed

of his own decision that he hadn't been able to face his friends with the truth. He was taking a huge gamble, but every fiber of his being screamed at him that he had to do this. And yet, he still couldn't bring himself to say the words, because saying them would expose his guilt, and make the decision too real.

"Come on," coaxed Tessa, "why don't you say it? Put Trevor here out of his misery."

"You're right," said Hank, reluctantly, casting his eyes down towards the floor. "I think Shaw might be our best hope. Our best hope for a cure to the Legacy Vims. And I'm committed to finding that cure, whatever it takes, whatever I might have to do."

"Say it," Tessa whispered in his ear. "Tell us why you came here." "I want you to inform Shaw ..." He hesitated then, and took a deep breath, steeling himself, before he let out the treacherous words at last. "... that I might be prepared to offer him my services."



I STILL SAY it's a trap," said Trevor Fitzroy, irritably. He led the way down the deep-carpeted corridor, not looking at Tessa, who lagged two steps behind him. He resented her presence here. Had she not turned up-had Shaw not sent her to spy on him, despite his assurances that he could deal with the X-Men himself-then one of his enemies would have been dead already. As it was, this glorified secretary had had Scribe and Mountjoy take the Beast downstairs to a

holding cell, while his fate was decided. He had gone without a fight, but he must have been feeling quite pleased with himself. He was getting what he wanted.

Tessa's office was next to Shaw's. Fitzroy tried to open the door, but it was locked. He sulked, as he was forced to step back and let her come forward with the key. "I told you, Mr. Fitzroy," she said, with an infuriating hint of condescension in her voice, "I've scanned his mind. The Beast's offer is sincere. He truly believes what he is saying."

"Then that psionic witch, Phoenix, has done something to him. She's disguised his thoughts somehow. You're supposed to be the bloody telepath around here, can't you see that?"

Tessa nodded. "It is possible. It's also possible that Doctor McCoy has simply chosen to see things our way. He wants to cure the Legacy Virus as badly as we do."

They walked into the office, and Tessa took a seat behind her desk. Fitzroy remained on his feet, pacing up and down. He had sent his bio-armor back to its other-dimensional pocket of reality, where it awaited his mental command to protect him again. In the meantime, he was clad in a black and white, high-collared bodysuit. "He wants us to believe him. He wants us to take him to the facility-and, mark my words, his teammates will follow."

"Perhaps," acknowledged Tessa, thoughtfully.

"Even if he is telling the truth, it won't stop the X-Men from looking for him."

"I'm still concealing his thought patterns."

"Oh, sure, that'll throw them off the track, won't it?" scoffed Fitzroy. "I mean, it's not like they'll ever think of coming here, is it?" "That's why we need to make a decision quickly. We must remove the Beast from this building, one way or the other."

"Then we kill him. It's not worth the risk of keeping him alive." "It might be."

"We don't need him!"

Tessa shook her head. "That, I'm afraid, is where you are wrong. If he is sincere about helping with our project, then his defection couldn't have come at a more opportune time. He could prove very useful to us."

"How? Shaw's already got the MacTaggart woman!"

"She wouldn't cooperate. We need a replacement, and McCoy would be ideal."

Fitzroy ceased his pacing, and pulled at his lower lip, stubbornly. This was news to him, and it changed everything. Clearly, Tessa thought their captive could make the difference between success and failure for the project. If she thought so, then doubtless Shaw did too. And, much as he hated to acknowledge the fact, Fitzroy dared not go against Shaw.

He remembered Wolverine's taunts, and knew that much of what he had said was painfully true. When Fitzroy had first come to this time, he had been running from a life in which he was nobody; from a father who took sadistic delight in humiliating him and making him look small. Here, he had thought, his advanced technology and his knowledge of things to come could give him an edge. He could gain power, respect and wealth.

Instead, he had been soundly beaten, several times over. He had even been left for dead by the gang of mutant terrorists known as X-Force.

Fitzroy played the long game now. He worked for people like Selene and Shaw because they could give him a taste of what he desired. But it was a temporary measure. When he had traveled back in time, this brash young mutant had promised himself that he would never be subservient to anyone again. He longed for the day when he would control the Hellfire Club, or an organization like it, himself.

Until then, he had to rein in his impatience, curb his frustration. He couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of his current benefactors. Not while he still had a use for them.

“Unfortunately,” said Tessa, “the communications blackout is still in force. We cannot contact Sebastian to request instructions. However, I believe he would want us to take the Beast to him. Don’t you agree?” She looked at Fitzroy with an arched eyebrow, as if challenging him to argue. He didn’t know why she had invited him to discuss the matter at all. She was just going through the motions of Hellfire Club protocol. She had already made up her mind, and she would get her own way.

“You really think he’ll help us find a cure?” he asked, delaying the inevitable.

“Yes,” said Tessa, “I think he will. There’s a chance, at least—and I thought you, Mr. Fitzroy, of all people, would want to take every chance you could get.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your greatest asset in the twenty-first century is your foreknowledge—but the Legacy Virus isn’t a part of your past, is it? It was created by a mutant from beyond your era: somebody who, like you, traveled back in time and made a difference. This isn’t quite the world you read about in your history books. It must be very discomfoting for you, to watch this plague spread without knowing when or how it will end.”

Fitzroy grunted a reluctant agreement to that, smarting at the unspoken implication. Shaw had appointed him to his Inner Circle specifically because he knew of events that had not yet happened. The more those events were distorted, the less recognizable this era was to him, and the more dispensable he would become.

He bit his lip, dropped himself into a seat and said, resignedly: “So, we do what the X-Man wants, I suppose. We take him to Shaw.” “I think so,” said Tessa. “In the meantime, I have been authorized to suspend all operations here in Hong Kong. The Lords Cardinal will regroup at the island facility, and remain there until the project is concluded.”

“What? Why?”

“Because the X-Men will almost certainly attack this headquarters again, and we can only lose personnel and equipment by attempting to defend it. Better to let them find an empty building, and search it to their hearts’ content. They will find nothing.” “Sounds to me like we’re giving in to them,” grumbled Fitzroy.

“While they waste precious time, we can be long gone from here.”

“Right. The sooner we leave, then, the better. I absorbed enough energy from Wolverine last night. I reckon I can open a portal directly to the island.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I came here in the helicopter. We need to take it back.”

“But the X-Men—”

“The X-Men don’t know we have their teammate. Yes, they might well find a way to follow us. But, if and when that happens-” Tessa smiled tightly. “We’ll deal with it.”

They’re leaving the building. Three.. .no, four.. .five... a whole string of black limousines, coming out of an underground garage.

Phoenix was still five blocks away when Nightcrawler’s message came in. The other X-Men had heard it too, thanks to the telepathic link that Jean had set up between them. She broke into a run, as did Cyclops, Wolverine and Iceman beside her.

I’ve got them, Rogue’s voice sounded in their minds. They’re all identical, and they have black-tinted windows. I can’t see if Hank’s inside any of them. Jean ... ?

Still no sign of him, Phoenix sent back. As soon as she had been told of the Beast’s disappearance, she had performed a telepathic sweep of the area, searching for her old friend. Somehow, his thought patterns had been masked from her. However, there had been one obvious place to search.

Nightcrawler had teleported directly to the Hellfire Club building. Phoenix could sense him now, his adhesive feet clinging through his soft boots to the side of an overlooking skyscraper. Rogue and Storm had followed, flying under their own power.

I'm almost in sight of the building, Storm reported. *Yes, I can see them.*

They're all out now, sent Nightcrawler. *A dozen cars, in all. They're splitting up, each heading in a different direction.*

This is a deliberate attempt to confuse us, Storm considered.

Get on them, people, ordered Cyclops. *Hank might be in one of those vehicles. We can't let any of them escape.*

The four ground-based X-Men had been halted by a particularly busy road junction. Before Phoenix could suggest levitating the quartet over the traffic—an act that would have meant blowing their cover, as they were still wearing their street clothes—Wolverine had

stuck out his hand and flagged down a cab. It threaded its way across two lanes and stopped beside them, at which point Logan wrenched open the door and removed the driver by force. Cyclops protested, but his Canadian teammate was already in the driving seat. “Anyone joining me?” he asked gruffly. The driver was on his back on the sidewalk, giving vent to a stream of expletives. Scott gave him an embarrassed smile, dropped some money into his hands and muttered an apology, as he followed Phoenix and Iceman into the back seat.

“We don’t have time to be polite,” said Wolverine. He reinforced his point by stepping on the gas, causing several vehicles to brake as he ran a red light. The cab skidded around a corner, pursued by a cacophony of angry horns.

Phoenix closed her eyes, and saw what Nightcrawler was seeing. He had waited for one of the black limousines to stop at a crossroads, and had teleported onto the top of it.

Whoever was inside had evidently heard his arrival, as a volley of machine-gun fire chattered through the roof at his feet. He leapt forwards, spread-eagled himself upside-down across the windscreen, grinned and shouted “Boo!” at the unseen driver. Then he flipped backwards, landing on his feet even as the car swerved off the road and collided with a brick wall. Steam rose from beneath its bonnet, and the doors were thrown open. As four uniformed Hellfire Club agents emerged, Nightcrawler dropped into a crouch. He squinted to see past them, to ensure that there was nobody else inside their vehicle. “Sorry,” he said cheerfully, “wrong car!” And he teleported away.

Rogue, meanwhile, had employed similar but more direct tactics. By simply landing in front of another limousine, she had forced it to stop. This car too contained only costumed mercenaries, so she returned to the air, shrugging off their bullets as she chose another target.

Phoenix switched her focus to Storm. The wind-rider was still soaring above the streets, keeping track of all the fleeing cars at once. Phoenix saw them through her eyes. The time of day was working to the X-Men’s advantage: Hong Kong’s morning rush hour was just starting, and the Hellfire Club’s drivers were battling against growing traffic.

Phoenix drew Wolverine’s attention to a cluster of three black cars, which hadn’t yet been able to get away from each other. “Already on it, darlin’!” he responded. He took another corner, wide, and then threw the steering wheel hard right. With a squeal of tires and an odor of burnt rubber, the cab stopped almost within its own length, and turned sideways, effectively blocking the road. Almost immediately, a black limousine rammed into its back end, in an attempt to knock it out of its way. The cab conceded a quarter-turn, but it wasn’t enough to clear a space for the larger vehicle. The limousine backed up, stopped, surged forwards again and mounted the sidewalk, scattering a knot of pedestrians.

By this time, the four X-Men had spilled out of the battered taxicab, and Cyclops lifted his glasses and took out the rogue vehicle's nearside tires with two well-placed optic blasts. Phoenix knew he was sparing a thought for the onlookers, who were beginning to panic. He wished this situation could have been handled more discreetly.

Further up the road, two more black limousines were trapped by the gridlock they had created. Iceman and Wolverine made towards them, the former 'icing up' and creating a slide for himself, the latter bounding, animal-like, across the roofs of the intervening cars. As he did so, he pulled off his shirt and flung it to one side, revealing the top half of his costume underneath.

Phoenix checked in with Storm again. She had swooped down to deal with a limousine that had almost escaped onto an open road. A precisely controlled bolt of lightning burnt out its engine, with a pyrotechnic display that was impressive but safe. Nightcrawler, meanwhile, had emptied another car in his own inimitable way. Phoenix searched Storm's memories for her most recent sighting of the next nearest vehicle, and directed Kurt towards it.

A particularly reckless driver had failed to brake at the sight of Rogue in his path. Phoenix felt her bracing herself for the impact, and watched from afar as the front half of the limousine hit her and came off worse. Metal crumpled, glass shattered, and now Rogue could see into the car. The Beast wasn't present. Nor, the X-Men now knew, was he in any of the three cars stopped by Phoenix's party.

Four Hellfire Club agents had attacked Cyclops, but they hadn't been a threat to him. He had taken out three of them, and Jean seized the fourth telekinetically, making him drop his gun and freezing him to the spot. She was about to enter his mind, to see what he knew about the whereabouts of her teammate, when Wolverine's voice popped into her head: *No need for that, Red. I already handled it; used the traditional method.* She turned, to see that Wolverine had

pinned an agent to the side of his car, and was holding a claw to his throat. *McCoy was at the club all right. Took off with Tessa and Fitzroy, but none of these mooks know where they were headed. Got some useful information, though-and a hunch to try out. Rogue?*

I'm here, sugar, came the response through the psi-link.

Give me a lift, would you darling?

On my way!

A thought flashed through Cyclops's mind, so briefly that nobody but Phoenix could have known about it. He was suppressing a mild irritation at Wolverine, for going his own way rather than following orders. But he also knew that Wolverine's 'own way' was often very effective. Jean distracted him by relaying the news, from Storm, that there were only four cars left to search. Ororo was taking one, Nightcrawler another. Phoenix sent Iceman towards the third: with his ice slides, he could make good time. She levitated herself and Cyclops, and they passed over the heads of the confused and frightened crowd below, in the hope of intercepting the fourth. From this vantage point, she could see that several police cars were trying to fight their way through the snarled traffic towards them.

Rogue landed beside Wolverine, and he jumped onto her back, wrapping his arms and legs around her. She took to the air again, her Canadian teammate guiding her path. Phoenix listened in on his thoughts again, just long enough to know that he was directing her towards a small private airfield, a short way to the north.

Stepping through one of Trevor Fitzroy's portals was like being immersed in a split-second nightmare. The Beast felt cold and prickly, and he had an overwhelming sense of foreboding-and then it was gone, like a dream exposed to the daylight, and he wasn't sure he could even remember or describe the sensation any more. He wondered what manner of terrible realms the young mutant had to pass through, in order to bend real space as he did.

Hank ran across tarmac, with Tessa in front of him and Fitzroy behind, watching his every move. They reached a black helicopter and climbed into the front seat, Fitzroy taking the controls and Hank sandwiched between the two members of the Hellfire Club. Within seconds, the blades were rotating and the chopper was rising into the air. Less than two minutes later, they had swung out over the North Pacific Ocean. Hank looked down at the vast field of shimmering blue beneath him, and realized that there was no going back now.

"Worried yet?" asked Fitzroy, with a sly grin. "It's gonna be harder than you thought for your pals in the X-Men to follow you, isn't it?"

Hank didn't answer, but Tessa spoke up in a quiet voice, which betrayed no trace of alarm. "I wouldn't be so sure about that, Mr. Fitzroy. I'm reading the mental signatures of two people, about a mile behind us and closing. They're flying."

Fitzroy's expression was a mixture of surprise and anger; Hank would have found it quite comical, had it not been for the butterflies in his stomach. A part of him felt that he ought to have been relieved, but his overall reaction was one of disappointment and disbelief. They couldn't have found him. Not yet. Not until he had a few more answers. He wasn't ready.

"I knew it," snapped Fitzroy. "I told you this was a trap."

"This has nothing to do with me, I can assure you," Hank rumbled. "I can only assume that my colleagues discovered our method of decampment on their own initiative."

"One of the mercenaries must have talked," said Tessa.

"They're trained to keep silent," argued Fitzroy, "and they know nothing about the island."

"But they do know the location of the airfield," said Tessa, reasonably.

"And some of my friends can be remarkably persuasive," Hank muttered.

Tessa was punching instructions into a black, futuristic console, which was plugged into the helicopter's instrument panel. A tiny LCD screen lit up, but at first it showed nothing more than a flat expanse of light blue. As Tessa continued to tap away, Hank realized that he was looking at the output of a rear-mounted video camera, which soon found its targets. Two figures jerked into view on the screen, in low resolution: Rogue was flying through the clear sky, her face set into a determined expression, Wolverine on her back.

"Pursuit confirmed," said Tessa. "Mr. Fitzroy, I think we need your particular skills."

"You mean—?"

"They can't follow us through one of your portals."

Fitzroy hesitated for less than a second. Then he grinned, took his hands off the controls, and furrowed his brow in concentration. The air in front of them split open, forming another circular gateway, much bigger than the one that had taken them to the airfield. Hank steeled himself as the helicopter plunged into it. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again he could almost have believed that nothing had happened. The sky was still in front of him, the ocean still beneath. The view seemed completely unchanged.

Then Fitzroy brought the helicopter around, and Hank saw two familiar figures: Rogue and Wolverine, just as the miniature view-screen had shown them, but seen from behind now and much, much closer.

"Fitzroy, what do you think you're doing?" Tessa didn't raise her voice, but she couldn't conceal her alarm. "You were supposed to take us straight to the facility."

"I had a better idea. This way, we get two X-Men out of our hair for good."

The Beast realized what he had in mind. "No!" he cried, lunging towards him, trying to knock his hands from the controls, but he was too late. The helicopter bucked, as two sleek missiles shot out from somewhere beneath the

cockpit. They streaked into Hank's vision, trailing white smoke. Rogue was still reacting to the helicopter's unexpected appearance; by the time she started to take evasive action, the missiles were almost upon her.

"This wasn't part of the deal, Fitzroy!" Hank shouted. "If either of them are hurt—"

"You'll do what?" mocked Fitzroy. "You've already reneged on the deal, McCoy. But guess what? You still get to see the Black King, and to help him with the project. I think you'll find that we can be just as 'persuasive' as your friends."

Hank clenched his fists impotently, and held his breath. His heart sank as Rogue threw herself out of the missiles' path, only for them to turn and find her again. They were heat-seekers. She managed to lose one of them, by taking a turn so tight that it couldn't follow. But she had no chance against the other.

It was all over in seconds. Hank didn't see the impact, because the white smoke had billowed up around the helicopter, but he saw the flash and heard the bang of a tremendous explosion, and he felt the cockpit rocking so fiercely that Fitzroy had to fight just to keep them in the air.

As they finally emerged into clear skies again, Hank looked around desperately for a trace of his two teammates. There was nothing.

Wolverine twisted his body in midair, and hit the Pacific Ocean headfirst, breath held, his arms outstretched ahead of him like a champion diver. Even so, the impact from such a height was like smacking into concrete. Had it not been for his adamantium-laced skeleton, he would have been smashed unconscious. As it was, the shock to his system was enough to daze him, and to force air out of his mouth in a frenzy of bubbles.

The metal in his bones dragged him towards the seabed, but, in a way, this was a blessing, because otherwise he would have had no idea which way was up. The water was

icily cold, and, despite the insulation provided by his costume-and the jeans that he still wore over it—his healing factor had its work cut out for it just staving off hypothermia and preventing his body from shutting itself down.

He struck out with strong, tireless arms, but his lungs had begun to ache and it seemed like an eternity before he finally broke the surface. He took two great, rasping breaths, pedaled frantically to keep himself afloat, and picked up the sound of the Hellfire Club's departing helicopter with his ultra-sensitive ears. The vehicle was a diminishing speck on the horizon. He would worry about it later. Right now, satisfied that he wasn't about to die yet, he turned his thoughts to the plight of his teammate.

As the missiles had streaked towards them, as Rogue had realized she couldn't avoid them both, she had hurled her passenger away from her, as far and as fast as she could. Wolverine had had no choice in the matter. Hurtling towards the ocean, he had been forced to concentrate on his own survival. He had winced inwardly at the almost deafening sound of an explosion above and behind him. A blast of hot air had buffeted him, throwing him yet further away from Rogue. She had saved his life, but at what cost to herself?

Wolverine had an excellent sense of space. Even in free-fall, he had thought to check the position of the sun, and to run some quick calculations in his head. He knew roughly how far he had been thrown, and in which direction. Without pausing for rest, he launched himself into a powerful front crawl, until he was directly below the spot where he and Rogue had parted company. He took a few more strokes, to account for the fact that she would have been flying away from him for a second before the impact, then he brought up his legs, lowered his head and dropped beneath the waves again.

But he could see nothing-and, as he dropped still further, and the water around him became darker and dirtier, and his lungs began to hurt again, he realized that he was

probably wasting his time. He had glanced back, trying to see Rogue in the air, to fix her position, an instant after the big bang-but he had been dazzled by the flare, and then it had been too late. He knew where to begin his search, but he could only guess where the Southern X-Man might have been flung by the missile's detonation.

She was tough, he reminded himself. She had the nearinvulnerability of his old friend Carol Danvers, from back when she was Ms. Marvel. And Carol's powers had come from the Kree, and were nothing to sneeze at. But even if she had survived the missile attack, she would be in no state to fend for herself in these frigid waters.

Again and again, Wolverine returned to the surface for fresh oxygen. Each time, he hoped against hope to see the shape of his friend against the waves. He wanted to know that she had made it up here by herself, that she wasn't unconscious and sinking slowly into the depths. Each time, he was bitterly disappointed.

He continued searching for minutes after common-sense told him that, if Rogue was still down there somewhere, then she couldn't be alive. He returned to the surface again, exhausted, and in no condition to consider undertaking the long swim back to the shore.

He trod water, waited for the rest of the X-Men to rescue him and swore that, if Rogue really was dead, then he would make the Hellfire Club pay.

"Nightcrawler? Nightcrawler! Kurt, are you all right?"

Nightcrawler took a deep breath, and something caught in his throat. He doubled up, his stomach aching, and coughed water out of his lungs. Wheezing, he opened his eyes, and blinked away dark blotches to find himself looking up at the roof of the Blackbird's main cabin. He was sprawled across the floor, and Rogue was bending over him, concern in her eyes. Iceman was behind her, and Phoenix and Cyclops were up in the cockpit. Nightcrawler could hear the engines, and feel that the plane was in flight.

"I'm fine," he panted. "Just need to catch my breath, that's all." He hauled himself into a sitting position, leaning back against the base of a seat, and Rogue reached out a gloved hand to help him. His costume, he realized, was wet. Soaked through. Somebody had wrapped a thick towel around his shoulders. He could taste salt on his tongue.

"Easy there," said Rogue, and a guilty expression crossed her face. "You've taken enough knocks already on my account." She didn't look too healthy herself. Her face was pale, her hair was plastered down on her head and her voice was more subdued than normal.

"Not at all, Fraulein," Kurt assured her, chivalrously. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, composing himself as the pain in his guts receded. "All for one, and all that."

"You should get into some diy clothes, at least. You'll catch your death." Rogue had already changed into a spare costume, which must have been stored aboard the Blackbird. It was an old one: yellow with green highlights, over which she wore a bomber jacket with circled 'X' logos in red on each shoulder.

Memories were crashing back into Nightcrawler's mind. Through the telepathic link, he had been aware of Rogue and Wolverine's discovery at the airfield. The rest of the X-Men, eager to follow, had headed for their own vehicle. A frightened and overzealous police officer had fired two shots at Storm as she had passed overhead.

They had reached the Blackbird, at last, at another airfield. Wolverine had called in a favor from an old friend who worked there, and the plane had been hidden beneath an old tarpaulin, no questions asked. The heroes had piled into it, stripping down to their costumes, Cyclops taking the controls. Phoenix had dropped the link between her teammates by now, but she had still followed Rogue and Wolverine's progress herself. No sooner had the plane taken off when her face had turned ashen, and she had cried out: "They've been attacked!"

Nightcrawler had watched anxiously as the telepath had cocked her head to one side, as if listening. At last, she had announced: "Logan's OK, but Rogue's been clipped by a missile. She's down and out. Nightcrawler-" •

"I'm on it. Where is she?"

She had beamed a location directly into his mind. Not coordinates exactly, but an intuitive understanding of where Rogue was, relative to his current position. A trail of thought. And a warning, that his target was already underwater.

Nightcrawler had taken a deep breath, and teleported. The next thing he had been aware of was the shocking cold. He had thought himself prepared for it, but it had almost stolen the air from his lungs. He had forced his eyes to open, and had seen a dark shape in front of him, sinking. Rogue.

He had swum after her, trying to ignore the fact that he couldn't feel his extremities. For an awful few seconds, she had been sinking faster than he could catch her up. The current had threatened to tear him away from her, and he had felt so tired, as if he were about to black out himself. But, with a Herculean effort, he had managed to take hold of her.

The front of Rogue's sweater, and her costume beneath it, had been shredded and singed by the missile strike. Nightcrawler had clung tightly on to her, but had been extra-careful not to touch her bare skin with his. He didn't want a repeat of yesterday's experience. He had drifted with her, trying to visualize the inside of the Blackbird, but his brain had been too numbed by the cold to concentrate. He had teleported, at last, the strain of taking another person with him doubled by the desperate conditions, and by the sharp twinge in his side that had reminded him of his injuries. He had exhausted his remaining oxygen in a cry of pain and defiance. And, he remembered now, he had

collapsed as soon as he and Rogue had arrived back on the airplane.

"I'm not the one who got blasted out of the sky," he reminded his teammate. "How are you feeling?"

Rogue smiled, weakly. "Bruised and battered, if you want to know the truth. But I'll be OK. I might not be Wolverine, but this old body of mine's no slouch in the healing department."

"Where *is* Logan? How is he? Do you need me to-"

"The half-pint's fine. Holding out well, according to Jean. Ororo's gone to fetch him."

As if on cue, the main hatchway door was pulled open from the outside, and Storm carried a bedraggled Wolverine over the threshold, unconcerned by the fierce wind outside. His face cracked into a wide grin when he saw Rogue. "Good to see you, darling."

"Now that everybody's present and correct," Cyclops called over his shoulder, "we need to give some thought to what we're going to do next."

"I'm afraid I lost the chopper," said Rogue, ruefully.

"Jean, can you try locating Hank telepathically again?"

Phoenix shook her head. "I've been trying, Scott. If he was in that helicopter, then his thoughts have been shielded somehow. By Tessa, I'll bet."

"He was there," growled Wolverine. "I caught a glimpse of him, just before that scum Fitzroy pulled the trigger."

"I've been following the bearing they were on when Rogue last saw them," said Cyclops. "It looks like they were heading towards the Philippine Islands."

Wolverine shook his head. "They changed direction. Probably thought I was too busy drinking in seawater to notice. Roughly a hundred and thirty degrees from where Storm here picked me up." Cyclops smiled tightly, as he turned the plane around. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"A vehicle like that can't have too long a range," surmised Storm. "Certainly not enough to cross the Pacific

Ocean,” said Phoenix. “Either Fitzroy’s planning to double back on himself again, or-” “Or,” concluded Wolverine, “the Hellfire Club are holed up on an island out there somewhere.” He slapped his right fist into his left palm and muttered, under his breath: “In which case, it’s only a matter of time ...”

HON\

BELOW HIM, the Beast could see a small island. It was covered, for the most part, by a lush, green forest, which gave way to rocky

_beaches only at the island’s edges. He swallowed as he realized

that Fitzroy was bringing the helicopter in to land.

He had spent the journey in a state of nervous anticipation. The fact that he was shut into a confined space with two of the X-Men’s deadliest enemies hadn’t helped. He was worried they might have harmed Rogue and Wolverine, although he kept telling himself that both had survived far worse than an unexpected plunge into the Pacific Ocean. Even so, he couldn’t help but wonder if he was doing the right thing.

“Getting nervous are we, old chap?” taunted Fitzroy, casting a sideways glance at his passenger. Hank didn’t answer. “Can’t blame you if you are. You think Shaw needs your help? What if he doesn’t? You’re a long way from anyone who can save you.”

“Just take us down, Fitzroy,” the Beast growled, baring his fangs. “My business is with the organ-grinder, not with his monkey.”

“I hope he *does* turn you down,” snarled Fitzroy. “Perhaps he’ll throw you to me.”

He guided the helicopter down to the forest and into a small clearing, which could barely contain it. Its blades were almost close enough to the trees to shred the leaves in their uppermost branches. The landing site, Hank realized,

benefited from the greatest possible natural cover. It would be difficult for anyone to find them here.

He looked at Tessa. She didn't return his gaze. She seemed relaxed enough, but she had to be concentrating to maintain her blockade around his mind. She hadn't spoken since his teammates had disappeared beneath the waves. Briefly, he considered attacking her, taking her by surprise, distracting her for just a second. That was all Phoenix would need to locate his thought patterns, to get a rough fix on his location. But then, if his meeting with Shaw went as he expected-and Fitzroy's snide comments aside, he had no reason to believe it wouldn't-then the last thing he would want was for the X-Men to interfere.

And, he thought belatedly, how could he surprise a telepath anyway? Tessa was inside his head, no doubt monitoring his thoughts. She probably knew about his plan, and about his decision not to implement it, already. He resisted the urge to flash her a guilty smile.

They stepped out of the helicopter, Tessa going first. Fitzroy placed a hand on the Beast's shoulder and gave him a helping push out of the cabin, as if he were a captive. Hank didn't rise to the bait. Let him play his power games.

At the edge of the clearing was an entranceway. It was constructed from thin beams of metal, and resembled nothing more than a phone booth put together with Meccano. However, Hank could see it housed the top of a stairway. Tessa made her way towards it, and he followed her, with Fitzroy behind him.

Then, suddenly, he was alerted by crashing sounds in the undergrowth, and Hellfire Club agents in their distinctive blue and red costumes burst into the clearing from all sides.

The Beast tensed and dropped into a crouch, but the agents just brought up their machine-guns to cover the newly arrived trio, and made no further move towards them. Tessa seemed to take the ambush in her stride, but Hank

could sense Fitzroy twitching resentfully beside him. For a second, he thought he might actually attack his allies.

From the direction of the entranceway, came the sound of somebody clearing his throat deliberately. Hank turned to find Sebastian Shaw standing at the top of the stairs, flanked by two more uniformed guards.

"Welcome to my island," he said. He smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at, Shaw?" snapped Fitzroy. .

"You'll have to excuse the reception committee." Shaw's words were polite enough, but the tone of his voice was hard, betraying a hint of anger. "When your perimeter scanning systems inform you that two of your colleagues are bringing one of your sworn enemies to your base of operations ... well, you can understand why one has to be careful."

"The X-Man is our prisoner!" contested Fitzroy. "Don't you see? We've managed to capture one of these 'sworn enemies' of yours." "Actually," Hank spoke up, apologetically, "I would dispute the veracity of that statement."

"Doctor McCoy has volunteered his services for the project, sir," said Tessa.

"Oh?" Shaw looked surprised.

"In fact," Hank corrected her, "I merely intimated that I might be prepared to enter into a temporary alliance with you for the sake of our common purpose. Firstly, of course, I would need to know more about your operations. Secondly, my cooperation would be contingent upon your assurance that Moira MacTaggart is, and will remain, safe and unharmed."

Shaw nodded. "I see no problem with those conditions." He looked sharply at Fitzroy. "What precautions did you take to ensure the X-Men didn't follow you?"

“We shot two of them out of the sky,” boasted Fitzroy. Shaw was treating him like a child, and the young mutant clearly resented him for it. “They didn’t come back after that!”

“They will,” said Shaw, “sooner or later. Tessa, put up the vibro-screen and man the defenses. Doctor McCoy, I won’t deny I could use your help. But if I ever have cause to suspect that you plan to betray me ..He left the threat unfinished.

“I have deduced correctly, have I not?” said Hank, evenly. “You brought Moira here to assist you in your quest for a cure for the Legacy Virus?”

“Correct,” said Shaw.

“For which you would require her willing participation.” “Unfortunately, Doctor MacTaggart chose not to accept my proposition.”

“As she has before. So ..Hank took a deep breath, and tried not to betray his trepidation as he prepared to ask the most important question. The one that had brought him here. The one that mattered. “What made you think you could change her mind now?”

Shaw’s smile grew broader as he stepped to one side and, with a sweep of his arm, indicated the entranceway behind him. “Allow me to show you.”

Shaw led the way down the stairs, his two personal guards at his shoulder, followed by the Beast, then Tessa and Fitzroy. The faceless agents came behind them, booted feet clanging on metal steps as they filed back into the base. They reached a long hallway from which several corridors branched, along with more stairs leading further downwards. The walls were dull, metallic and gray. Hank suspected that they also gave off photons, as he could see no other light source.

“You should know,” said Tessa, leaning close to his ear as if the information were confidential, “that this facility is proofed against psionic intrusion. Your telepathic friend

won't be able to find you." Then she turned on her heel and marched smartly away, her duties here discharged.

The agents dispersed around Hank, many of them clattering down to the next level, some disappearing down the various corridors. Fitzroy, he noted, stood guard at the stairs to the entrance, glowering at him as if daring the X-Man to try to get past him. Hank stood, taking in his surroundings, as Sebastian Shaw and his guards waited patiently.

"This is all veiy impressive," he remarked. "Your own island headquarters."

"A legacy, you might say. This facility was constructed many millennia ago by an alien race known as the Kree." Hank nodded. He had encountered the Kree before. "They used it as a spaceport and a scientific base during their early explorations of Earth. It was rediscovered by the Fantastic Four, some years ago."

"Ah yes, I recall the case." Hank's brow furrowed as he dredged up old memories of Avengers files. Reed Richards and his family had stumbled upon the abandoned Kree island by accident, and had found themselves drawn into a battle with a mechanical Sentry left behind by the ancient space-faring civilization. It had been the first of many recorded encounters between humankind and the Kree, and it had set the tone for most of those to come. Having only narrowly defeated their foe, the Fantastic Four had had to flee before the Sen-tiy could destroy the island, and the Kree's secrets with it. "Clearly," he said out loud, "that initial encounter was less destructive than Professor Richards believed."

"The island was submerged, and there was extensive damage to this facility."

"And yet here it is now, raised from the seabed, good as new." Hank shot his host a penetrating glare. "And, if I'm not very much mistaken, several thousand miles from its

original location. Who do you know, I wonder, who has the power to accomplish that?"

"I have my contacts," said Shaw, darkly. "But that isn't important." He led the way along the hallway and down one of the connecting corridors. Hank fell into step by his side. Shaw's two guards also accompanied them, their blank masks concealing their emotions as always. Hank was pleased to note that they left Fitzroy behind, at least. "The important thing," said Shaw, "is the technology I now possess. Alien technology, Doctor McCoy. Not to mention the records still contained within the core memory of the base's computer."

The Beast's eyes widened. "From a time when the Kree, by all accounts, were conducting genetic modifications willy-nilly upon our forefathers!" He hardly dared to let himself hope. Throughout the galaxy, the Kree were known not only as fierce and proud warriors but also as master geneticists. Even thousands of years ago, they had doubtless understood more about human mutation than Henry McCoy did now.

"It took months for my technicians to reconstruct the corrupted data," said Shaw. "Longer still for it to be deciphered."

"But now, you must have access to information that could revolutionize genetic science!"

Shaw smiled. "I see you are beginning to understand."

He pushed open a set of double doors, and ushered his guest into a large room. It shared the dull gray color scheme of the rest of the base, but the walls were lined with monitors, control banks and displays of various kinds. The bare floor was punctuated by four metal lab benches which were cluttered with discarded notes and medical equipment.

From various parts of the room four white-coated people looked up at the new arrivals. Hank recognized three of them from photographs he had seen at the mansion. Shaw reeled off the names of each in turn, starting with Doctor

Scott. The gray-haired black man glowered at Hank and Shaw over the top of a pair of frameless spectacles. Professor Travers, similarly, made no attempt to disguise his hostility towards them. An elderly gentleman, his features were mostly concealed by a bushy, white beard. Perched on a stool, a microscope in front of her, Doctor Takamoto was a young, attractive Japanese woman with shoulder-length dark hair. She looked away quickly, as if afraid to let Hank read her expression.

“And, of course,” Shaw concluded, “you already know Doctor Campbell.”

“Hank, what are you doing here?” Rory Campbell was a tall, well-built man in his early thirties. A white streak ran through his swept-up brown hair, and beneath his coat he wore a bodysuit, which was also predominantly brown but blue around the shoulders, the colors separated by a slanting red stripe. If he was pleased to see

Hank, then he didn’t show it. He wore a habitually grim expression, and his green eyes were haunted by the future.

Campbell had once been afforded a glimpse of his own fate. He knew he would end his days as a savage, one-legged, mutant-hunting slave. He had vowed to fight against that destiny, but part of it had come to pass already. He hobbled across the laboratory on a crutch, having lost his left leg some time ago in an accident on Muir Island. He had refused to have a prosthetic limb fitted. Hank guessed he saw the inconvenience as a reminder to himself not to be careless again. And, of course, as a reminder that the future was getting closer.

“Doctor McCoy is considering joining our team,” said Shaw. Campbell tilted his head in mild surprise, but otherwise took the news in his stride. “You’d be a welcome addition,” he said. “We’ve made some good progress here, but I can’t deny we could be doing better. It would be useful to have a fresh pair of eyes looking over our work so far.

And we have a few specific problems that you might be able to help us with. I was hoping to have Moira join us, but

“Doctor MacTaggart was quite stubborn, as I have explained,” interrupted Shaw.

“You mean she had bothersome principles,” said Hank. “I want to see her before I’ll agree to anything. Where is she?”

“In living quarters downstairs,” said Shaw, “where she is perfectly comfortable.”

Campbell drew Hank to one side. “Before you talk to Moira, why don’t you take a look up here for yourself? See what you might be getting yourself into.” He punched a few short commands into a keypad, which was set into the nearest wall, and a monitor lit up with a string of numbers and letters. The characters raced across the screen so quickly that it took Hank a second to realize what he was seeing. When he did, his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“I knew the Kree were experts,” he breathed, “but... but they’ve mapped parts of our genetic structure that we hardly knew existed ...” He wished he had his notepad with him. But even if he had, there wouldn’t have been time to scribble down more than a tiny fraction of this information. He looked at Campbell. “They even seem to have postulated the eventual emergence of the mutant gene.” “The Kree conducted various studies into possible evolutions of the human race,” explained Campbell. “Have you ever heard of the Inhumans?”

“Of course. An offshoot of humanity, created by the Kree thousands of years ago and yet similar in many respects to the species that is only now beginning to evolve naturally.”

“This computer is a treasure trove of information,” said Campbell. “Not only that, but it can run detailed analyses and accurate projections of staggering complexity, so fast that our only problem is keeping up with it. With somebody like you on board ..

“So, Doctor McCoy,” said Shaw, who was waiting by the doors, “I think you’ve seen enough to agree that I am

offering you an unparalleled opportunity to achieve your goal.”

“Perhaps,” said Hank guardedly, his mind still racing with the possibilities.

“Which is surely what you hoped to find when you first volunteered to come here.”

“I can’t deny that.”

“Then perhaps you would like me to take you to see Doctor MacTaggart now.”

“If looks could kill,” muttered Hank, as he and Shaw retraced their steps to the entrance hall, the two Hellfire Club agents trailing a short distance behind them.

“Campbell aside, your specialists don’t appear to think much of you-or of me, by association. The usual mutant phobia? Or have you done something in particular to arouse their ire?”

“My fault, I confess,” said Shaw. “They didn’t exactly volunteer for this project.”

“Oh yes,” said Hank, with distaste, “I’m well aware that Moira wasn’t your only recent kidnap victim. But it’s more than that, isn’t it? Why are those people working for you at all?”

“Do you find it so strange that *homo sapiens* would help to combat a disease associated primarily with *homo superior*?” It was a rhetorical question, apparently, as Shaw didn’t give Hank time to answer. With a hollow laugh, he continued: “You’re right, of course. You know as well as I do that scientists prepared to tackle the Legacy Virus have been thin on the ground, and funding even more so.”

“That’s beginning to change.”

“Only now that that Legacy has spread to their kind!” spat Shaw. “Even so, too little, too late. I approached Scott, Takamoto and Travers with a reasonable offer. Good terms and conditions. They refused me. Even after I had brought them here, they needed ... further persuasion.”

Hank narrowed his eyes. “What did you do?”

"I gave them a personal stake in our project."

"You infected them with the vims, didn't you?"

Shaw's only answer was a smug smile, but it was enough for Hank to know that his accusation was true. He seized the lapels of the Black King's jacket and lifted him bodily, slamming him back into the metal wall of the corridor and screaming into his face: "*You bastard, you've given them the virus!*" The guards reacted instantly, bringing up their guns and training them upon the X-Man's head. By now, however, the Beast had Shaw pinned to the wall by his neck. He breathed heavily, bringing his anger back under control. His sudden outburst had surprised even him. But he had begun to see a solution to his problems, to the problems of the world. And then Shaw had reminded him of just how far he would have to compromise his ethics to achieve it. He had flaunted Hank's helplessness, showed him that people were still dying around him, whatever he did.

To make matters worse, his enemy was unruffled. "May I remind you," he said smoothly, "of my mutant ability to absorb kinetic energy."

"It won't do you much good," said the Beast, tightening the hand that he held around Shaw's throat, just a little, "if I apply enough pressure to your larynx to crush it."

"Perhaps not," Shaw conceded, in a husky but perfectly even voice. "However, your assault upon my person has already improved my strength and stamina. I can guarantee that you wouldn't have time to do me serious harm before my agents could fire a considerable number of bullets into your brain."

The Beast glared into Shaw's inscrutable eyes for a long moment, then lowered him back to the floor and stepped away from him. The guards relaxed, and Shaw brushed out the creases in his maroon velvet jacket and picked off a blue hair. "Oh dear," he said, without regret, "am I to take it that I've lowered your opinion of me?"

"I doubt I could think any less of you than I already did!" the Beast growled.

Shaw smiled, as if he had been complimented rather than insulted. "But you're prepared to deal with me, nevertheless; to sell your soul to the devil in exchange for your heart's desire."

"That remains to be seen," said Hank.

But he knew, deep down, that it was true.

Moira MacTaggert didn't know what to expect when she heard footsteps outside her room.

It seemed like only a few minutes since Shaw had left her here. She had expected him to cast her into a dingy prison cell somewhere.

He had certainly been angiy enough when she had refused his offer to join him, although he had tried to hide it behind his usual mask of confidence. But then he had escorted her down here, to these quarters: a small room, to be sure, but carpeted and wallpapered and with a comfortable bed.

She had slept since then, sinking into the soft mattress and allowing exhaustion to overtake her. This time, there had been no dreams.

Now, as sturdy bolts were pulled back on the other side of the door, she scrambled to her feet. She had no idea how long she had slept. There were no windows in this underground complex, and her body clock was shot. Perhaps Shaw felt he had given her long enough to reconsider her decision. Perhaps he was here to put his proposal to her again. Perhaps, this time, he would not take no for an answer.

The door opened, and Moira felt a surge of relief at the sight of her blue-furred friend and colleague, Hank McCoy. Then she realized that he was standing between Sebastian Shaw and two Hellfire Club agents. "Och, Hank!" she blurted out. "Don't tell me they got you too. Don't tell me they thought *you'd* throw in your lot with that madman!"

She expected the Beast to respond with a ready quip. Instead, he turned to Shaw, a dejected look on his face, and asked: "Can you give us a few minutes alone?" To Moira's puzzlement, Shaw nodded and motioned to his guards. They stepped aside, allowing Hank to enter the room. A guard closed the door behind him, but didn't bolt it again.

Moira's visitor greeted her with an embarrassed smile. "What's going on, Hank?" she asked, frowning, already suspecting what he had to tell her but not wanting to believe it. "Are the other X-Men here too?"

He shook his head. "I came here alone, and of my own volition."

"Lucky you!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Shaw led me to believe you hadn't been hurt. If he was being less than truthful—"

She waved aside his concern. "I'm still in one piece. He hasn't treated me too badly, all things considered. But Hank ..." Her voice trailed off. She didn't want to say the words. But, as she looked into the Beast's face, she knew they were true, and that there was no escaping them. "Hank—you've agreed to help him, haven't you?"

He nodded, shamefacedly, avoiding her gaze. "I'm about to. I hoped you'd understand."

"Understand? Hank, we're talking about Sebastian Shaw!"

"I'm perfectly aware of that."

"Then perhaps you've forgotten who he is. This is a mutant who builds Sentinels—robots specifically designed to hunt and kill other mutants—and sells them to the government. A man who once allied himself with the X-Men's greatest enemy, Magneto. And how can you just overlook what he did to Jean?"

"I'm not overlooking anything," said Hank, although he flinched visibly at the memories that Moira had stirred up. Moira herself could feel her temper flaring, as she thought about how Shaw and his Inner Circle had unleashed the

monster called Dark Phoenix upon the universe. “But if he can help us to achieve something worthwhile—” “Then you're prepared to give him what he wants!”

“What he wants, Moira, is what we all want: a cure for the Legacy Virus.”

She shook her head. “No, Hank, what Shaw wants is power. That’s all he’s ever wanted, and he doesn’t care who he steps on in the process of acquiring it. If he can find a cure, then what do you think he’ll do with it? Just hand it over to anyone who needs it?”

“I accept that his motives may not be entirely altruistic, but—” “But nothing! Shaw as good as told me he’d have control over who’d receive his cure and who wouldn’t. And he’d use that power, Hank, you know he would. Sebastian Shaw would decide who gets to live and who dies. Is that what you want?”

“If the alternative,” said Hank, in a quiet voice, “is that everybody dies, then wouldn’t it be preferable?”

“I don’t believe I’m hearing this.” Moira was almost lost for words. “After all the times we discussed this... after Campbell walked out on me ... I thought you were on my side.”

She must have touched a nerve, because Hank looked directly at her for the first time, his eyes pleading with her. “I *am* on your side, Moira, and I appreciate what you’re saying. I disapproved of Campbell’s defection as strongly as you did, and for the same reasons—but things have changed. Shaw is on the verge of a breakthrough, whereas our research has floundered. It is no longer germane to ask who will be the first to reach our mutual goal. The question is, can it be reached at all?”

“It can,” insisted Moira, “and we’ll reach it in our own way. It’s just a matter of time.”

“But we could have a cure *now*. Think, Moira!” Hank reached out and took her hands in his. His clawed fingers were surprisingly gentle. “We’d be saving lives. We’d be

saving *your* life. I can make it a condition of my assisting Shaw that you be among the first group of patients to be treated. Isn't that reason enough, on its own, to do this?"

"No! It's too high a price to pay. We'd just be exchanging one problem for another."

"A problem that seems insolvable for one that we can handle. It's a fair exchange."

"Oh, and you're so sure you can 'handle' Shaw?"

"We've beaten him before. If he gets his hands on a cure and misuses it, then we'll fight him again. We can take the cure from him." "So you say now. But what if you can't?"

"Then at the very least I'll have learned something. I'll have had an opportunity to work with Kree technology, to study their records. And, just as importantly, we'll know that a cure *is* possible, that our problem isn't insolvable after all. Even without access to the machinery in this base we'll have taken an important step closer to finding an answer for ourselves."

"You'll just have given Sebastian Shaw a head start."

"Yes."

"And what do you think he'll do with that head start, Hank? Imagine an army of mutants, all doing his bidding because he's the only person who can keep them alive. And I'm not just talking about the people who are suffering from the Legacy Virus already. How many more might he infect, if he knows it will give him complete control over them?"

"Or have you considered that he might just market the cure?" asked Hank. "That alone could earn him billions of dollars, and it would be perfectly legal."

"It's not enough for a man like him!"

"What I'm saying, Moira, is that this is only speculation. You're allying yourself with the Luddites; arguing that scientific advances shouldn't be made for fear that somebody, some day, might abuse them."

"That's not fair, Hank, and you know it!"

“I’m merely proposing that we deal with the immediate problem.” “And to hell with the consequences?”

“No. But we’ll cross the next bridge if and when we come to it.” “There are no ‘ifs’ about it. For your information, Shaw has already kidnapped and infected three people. He’s forcing them to work for him.”

Hank bowed his head. “I know-and, granted, it does provide some cause for concern.” He looked up again, and Moira could see that he had made up his mind. “But it’s also one of the reasons I must do this. Those people upstairs are dying, and they have a cure for their ailment almost within their reach. How can I refuse to help them? How can I let them down, as I let William Montgomery-and too many before him—down?”

Moira breathed in deeply, and released her frustration in a long, heartfelt sigh. She sat down on the bed, and cradled her head in her hands. It was beginning to ache, so she closed her eyes and massaged her temples with her fingers.

After a few seconds, she heard the Beast padding across the room to join her, and felt the depression of the mattress as he seated himself by her side.

“I had hoped you would help me,” he said, softly.

She shook her head, wearily. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

‘T share your reservations, but I truly believe this is the lesser of two evils.”

“I know you do. But I can’t agree.”

“Will you wish me luck, at least?”

“I hope things turn out the way you want them to.”

Hank smiled weakly, and they looked at each other with sad eyes. Then he stood again, walked over to the door and rapped sharply on it. Shaw came into the room, and glanced over at Moira. Hank responded with a mournful shake of his head.

They left without another word—and this time Moira heard the bolts sliding, making her a prisoner again. She lay back on the bed, a hundred thoughts chasing each other in

her weary mind. Hank had seemed so sincere, so determined, and she respected his judgement. She had never imagined they could argue about something like this. What if she had been wrong? She thought she had taken a moral stand, acted on her principles. But what if she had just let her famous stubborn streak blind her? What if Hank had made the only practical choice?

Thanks to him, at least Shaw would leave her alone now, and—who knew?—his plans might come to fruition after all. The world would be rid of the scourge of the Legacy Virus and Moira wouldn't be dying any more and the X-Men would take the cure out of Shaw's hands and all she had to do was wait and everything would soon be all right.

Hope had long been a stranger to Moira MacTaggert, and she felt almost guilty about entertaining it now. But it was an intoxicating emotion, and she could quite see how it had entranced her erstwhile lab partner, creeping up on him when he had thought it gone.

The lure of a happy ending, no matter how improbable, was strong. But the more she thought about such an ending, the more unlikely it seemed.

Perhaps that made her a pessimist. But Moira couldn't bring herself to believe that anything but ill could come of Hank McCoy's decision today.

Tessa seated herself in her small, circular cubicle, and flexed her fingers as she prepared to go to work. She was surrounded by freestanding terminals, which gave her access to the colossal computer that serviced the alien base. The inscriptions on their keypads and display units were in the Kree language, but this didn't bother her. Tessa's mind had often been compared to a computer itself. She had deduced the purpose of every interface, learned how to operate each one and committed the information to her precise memory in hours. Sebastian Shaw had had experts analyze the computer for months, and Tessa herself had

helped his scientists to access its basic functions-but nobody on this world knew it as well as she did.

She ran a series of basic checks on the island's defense systems, almost without having to think about it. Idly, she reflected on the Beast's arrival and wondered what effect it would have upon her employer's plans. Sebastian would have to let him talk to Moira MacTaggert, of course. The Scots woman would try to dissuade him from his proposed course of action. She had a chance of succeeding. But then Tessa had seen inside Hank McCoy's mind, and-despite his doubts-it was her considered opinion that he would not be swayed.

Tessa calculated that Sebastian might achieve his goals this time. If he did, it would be as much by luck as by judgement. As always, he had taken too many risks, and made some very bad decisions. She had cautioned him against involving Doctor MacTaggert in his schemes, predicting that she wouldn't cooperate with him. He had ignored her counsel.

It wasn't that he didn't listen to Tessa. He employed her as his personal assistant precisely because he admired her logic and valued her advice. But there was a definite limit to which he would let anybody change his mind once it had been made up. Tessa had realized this quickly, and had learned to stay in her place, to nudge her employer gently in the right direction without ever pushing him too hard.

She had long since given up trying to advise Sebastian about his alliances. It was almost as if he deliberately surrounded himself with people he couldn't trust, as if it were a game to him. And then he would test them. He had two personalities: he could be charismatic-even seductive—one minute, a coldhearted monomaniac the next. He drew people to him, and then challenged them to betray him. Tessa just did her job, kept out of the way of such monsters as Selene and Madelyne Pryor, and helped to pick up the

pieces when Sebastian's power games inevitably exploded in his face.

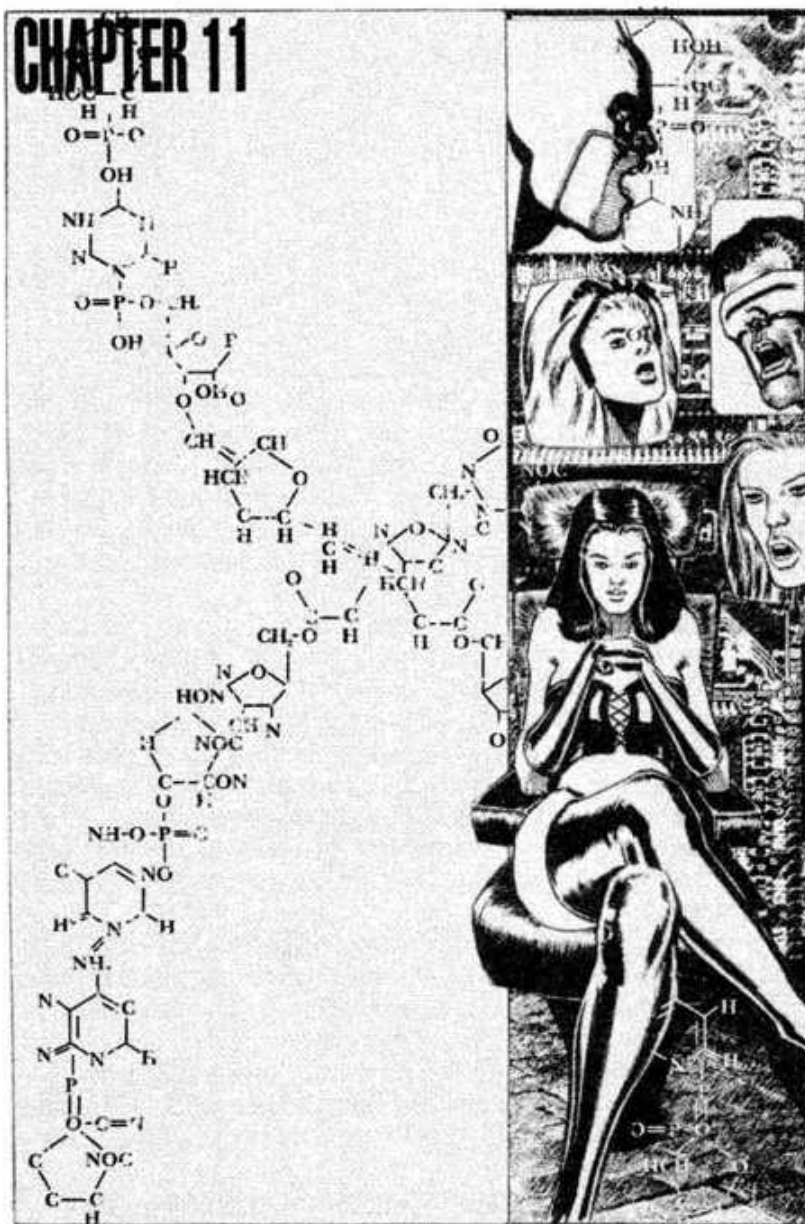
Right now, she had an important role to play, and she intended to do her duty in the most efficient manner possible. Like Sebastian, Tessa had no doubt that the X-Men would locate this facility in time. She had to keep them from interfering with the project. With the technology at her disposal, she was confident she could do so.

She activated the vibro-screen that surrounded the island: its first line of defense. Then, with a practiced sweep of her hand, she brought a series of monitors to life in the curved wall around her. Each screen showed a different part of the forest above, each picture shot at an upward angle from ground level.

The computer reported that all other systems were active and standing by, and Tessa sat back in her seat and steepled her fingers. She was ready.

As if on cue, a red light began to wink on one of the alien terminals. The proximity alarm. This was how Sebastian had known about her own arrival, along with Fitzroy and the Beast. Tessa checked the readouts and smiled to herself, anticipating the challenge. An airplane was approaching the island, and the computer detected the energy signatures of seven mutants on board, none of whom were known to it. It could only mean one thing.

The X-Men were here.



OMETHING'S GOTTEN hold of the Blackbird!"

Cyclops had known something was wrong, even before Rogue's urgent ciy had confirmed it. He had been looking out of ;Twindow, down at the small, uncharted, wooded island beneath them. Rogue had been guiding the plane in closer, as per his instructions. Cyclops had strained to make out as many features as he could, searching in particular for any signs of habitation. He hadn't found any.

At first, the gentle vibrations had been indistinguishable from normal air turbulence. But then, they had intensified a hundredfold. The X-Men had braced themselves as they were tossed from side to side, and the Blackbird's engines had begun to scream in protest.

Heedless of his own safety, Cyclops pulled off his seatbelt and jumped to his feet. The cabin bucked beneath him as he struggled to make his way forwards. It felt as if a giant fist had taken hold of the plane and was shaking it at will. Finally, he reached the pilot's seat and supported himself against its back. "What's happening, Rogue?" he asked tersely.

"We've flown into some sort of interference." Rogue didn't turn around. Her eyes were fixed on the dials before her, her knuckles white on the joystick and her expression grim. "I can't pull us out of it. It's taking all I've got to keep this crate in the air!"

"We're losing altitude and airspeed," Phoenix confirmed from beside her. Cyclops could see that for himself. The artificial horizon indicator was gyrating wildly, unable to keep up with the plane's repeated changes in altitude.

"This isn't a natural phenomenon," Storm informed them from behind. "I can summon winds to help keep us level, but I cannot calm the vibrations themselves."

"I'm gonna have to bring us down before we tear ourselves apart," said Rogue through gritted teeth. "Sorry, Cyke, looks like we're about to lose another 'Bird."

"That's the least of my worries right now, Rogue."

"I suggest y'all bail out," said Rogue. "Leave me to it. I might be able to keep the plane in one piece, but I can't guarantee a soft landing!" ,

"No," Nightcrawler spoke up. "I'll take the controls. If the worst comes to the worst, I can 'port myself out of here before we hit the ground."

"Agreed," said Cyclops. "Besides, we need all the fliers we can get to help us evacuate. Ororo, I want you to

concentrate on keeping this plane as steady as you can. Jean, take the controls until Kurt gets into the pilot's seat. Rogue, take Wolverine and get out of here!"

The X-Men moved into action, obeying their leader's commands. Even if they disagreed with him, they were trained well enough to know that there was no time to argue. As Cyclops stepped aside to allow first Rogue and then Nightcrawler to pass him, the Blackbird gave a particularly violent jolt, and he tumbled against the hull. He rubbed his bruised shoulder ruefully, and clung to a chair for dear life as Rogue wrenched open the hatchway and a fierce gale gusted through the cabin. Wolverine wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and his legs around her hips, and she carried him out into the sky. Storm followed them, gliding gracefully on the wind.

"Jean!" yelled Cyclops, over the roaring sound of evacuating air, the increasingly sick whining of the engines and the screeching of the plane's tormented chassis.

"I'm ready!" she yelled back, as Nightcrawler took the controls from her.

Cyclops trusted her, enough to place his life in her hands. He made his way unsteadily to the hatch, and let the wind take him. His stomach lurched as he dropped away from the Blackbird, and saw the ground—far nearer than he had expected—rushing up towards him. He spread his arms and legs wide, and free-fell towards it, almost grateful for his visor because it kept the wind from stinging his eyes.

He could almost have reached out and touched the tops of the trees when, finally, he felt his rate of descent slowing. He smiled to himself, and angled his body so that he dropped into the forest feet first. He landed in the undergrowth, with no more force than if he had just stepped off the bottom rung of a ladder. He looked up in time to see Phoenix and Iceman gliding to a similarly gentle halt beside him. With Rogue carrying the heaviest X-Man, Jean's

telekinesis had been more than up to the task of lowering the others.

"I think it's safe to say that we've found the right island," said Phoenix.

"Unless there's more than one super-villain base in these parts," said Iceman, dryly. "I didn't see any buildings as we came down, though."

"An underground installation, most likely," said Cyclops. "Can you sense Hank or Moira yet, Jean?"

"Not a trace. I've swept the island telepathically, but the only people I can detect are our own. If the Hellfire Club are under our feet, then they must have very good psi-bafflers."

The trio looked up in unison as the Blackbird screamed over their heads, trailing a plume of smoke. Cyclops resisted the urge to duck. The plane was low now, almost scraping the trees. He tried not to worry about Nightcrawler. He knew how to look after himself. And the X-Men were more than used to being shot out of the sky. It was beginning to seem like a monthly occurrence.

"I doubt we've seen the last of this island's defenses yet," he considered. "It's dangerous for us to be separated."

"I agree," said Phoenix. "We should get back to the others as quickly as possible."

"Gee," mugged Iceman, shielding his eyes as he looked up into the sky at the Blackbird's lingering smoke trail. "Do you think we'll be able to find them?"

Cyclops chose not to answer that. He set off through the forest at a run, and his teammates fell into step beside him.

Rogue hovered in midair, her fingers crossed as she watched the Blackbird diving towards the trees, Storm flying beside it. She was aware of Wolverine's breath, warm against her ear. "The imp's never gonna make it!" his rough voice growled in her ear. "He'd better have the sense to get out of there while he can."

The trees were clawing at the plane's hull now, gouging lines in the paint-work. One of the engines was on fire. With

Storm's help, Nightcrawler had succeeded in lifting the nose so that the craft was almost level. Without a clear spot to land in, though, he was still in trouble. He had waited until the last possible minute before lowering the landing wheels, but Rogue could see that they were already taking a beating.

The Blackbird ran out of momentum at last, and belly-flopped into the forest, crashing through a nest of branches and sending up a cloud of smoke and dust, which obscured Rogue's view of the landing site for a full minute. She landed as near to it as she dared, and Wolverine immediately leapt to the ground and scuttled forwards.

The Blackbird lay lopsidedly on its broken undercarriage, at the end of a surprisingly short set of skid marks, in a clearing it had made for itself among the trees. It would need some work to get it into the air again—but, considering what it had just been through, it was a miracle that it wasn't a write-off. Storm had summoned a localized rain shower to extinguish the flames that still burnt in the engine housing, and to put out the small, scattered fires that had started in the wake of the plane's tumultuous landing. Steam rose from the battered metal as cold water pelted down upon it.

Anxiously, Rogue looked for the erstwhile pilot, but could see no sign of him. In front of her, Wolverine crouched and sniffed the air, but she doubted if he could pick up anything useful over the acrid smell of burning.

Someone was knocking on the inside of the Blackbird's dented hatch. Before she could react, the door flew open, to hang limply from one hinge. Framed in the aperture, Nightcrawler looked unsteady on his feet, and he held his shoulder as if wounded. Rogue's heart leapt in horror at the realization that he had stayed in the plane. But he sprang into the air, somersaulted to the ground and took an elaborate bow. "Please, please, no applause—just throw flowers!"

"You almost got yourself killed!" growled Wolverine, but he couldn't mask the affection and relief in his voice.

"Hey, where's the fun in fighting to protect a world that hates and fears you if you can't make a stupidly heroic gesture once in a while? And, whatever our fearless leader might say, I doubt if the X-Men's budget can stretch to another new Blackbird just yet."

He took a step towards them, and his legs buckled beneath him as his eyelids closed and his head lolled back on his shoulders. Wolverine must have seen it coming: he moved with lightning speed and was by his teammate's side in time to catch him.

"Is he all right?" asked Rogue.

"He'll live. He's just taken one too many knocks lately." Rogue was uncomfortably aware that she was largely responsible for that. If Kurt was badly injured, she would never be able to forgive herself.

Storm joined them, having dissipated her rain clouds. "Have you noticed the flowers around here?" she asked. "I don't believe I've ever seen anything quite like them."

She indicated the small flowers that grew between the roots of one of the nearby trees. Their star-shaped petals were a startling lime green in color, and they sprouted in cup formations around violet buds. To Rogue's eyes, the clashing colors made the flowers look quite ugly. She had never seen their type before, but then she didn't share Storm's interest in botany. Looking around, she saw more of the same flowers, growing in isolated clusters.

"Don't recognize the scent," said Wolverine, "but they aren't artificial."

"We have a mystery, then."

"Which I suggest we investigate later," said Rogue. "Somehow, I think we might have lost the element of surprise when we brought this here plane down."

"She's right," said Wolverine. "We need to find the others."

"She's right. We need to find the others."

"Too late," said Tessa to herself, with a confident smile. Wolverine's grim expression was framed on one of the screens in front of her. Elsewhere on the single wall of the circular room, she could see worm's eye view images of the other six intruders. The sight of an unconscious Nightcrawler was especially gratifying to her. The vibro-screen had surpassed expectations. It had felled one of the X-Men and split them into two groups. Tessa intended to take full advantage of that latter fact.

Cyclops, Phoenix and Iceman were jogging through the forest towards their colleagues. They would reach them within minutes-unless somebody stopped them.

Wolverine had been right about the green flowers. They weren't artificial—not entirely—but he hadn't imagined that they might be alien in origin. The Kree were specialists in the fields of both mechanics and genetics. The flora of this island had been enhanced by a combination of DNA modification and cybernetic implants. The fact that it could act as a network of ground-level spy cameras was the least of its uses.

Tessa entered a series of commands into the Kree computer, her fingers moving quickly and confidently across the alien controls. She smiled at the knowledge that somewhere above her head-but below her enemies' feet-mechanical devices were now releasing a controlled combination of pheromones, which in turn would awaken a biological imperative in the local plant-life.

An imperative to attack.

At first, Cyclops thought he had merely stumbled in the undergrowth. But then something strong and slender wound itself around his left ankle, and he realized that the undergrowth itself was trying to trip him. "Jean, Bobby, face front!" he rapped. "We've got a situation."

"So I see," said Phoenix.

It was easy enough for Cyclops to tear his foot free-but, wherever else he placed it, he could see the ground churning, as roots and tendrils crept towards their target.

“Not another living island,” moaned Iceman. “Please, not another living island!”

And then the trees themselves reached out, their branches like arms, and Cyclops barely had time to shout a warning before he was entangled. Thorns pricked at him, and snagged on his insulated uniform. He struggled, and felt the satisfying snap of a dozen twigs. But for every one that broke, more came grasping for him, scratching at the exposed skin of his face. He operated his visor, and branches crackled and withered in the destructive path of his eye-beam. In between blasts, he glanced over at his teammates. Phoenix was using her telekinesis. He could see it was an effort for her to locate and take hold of so many targets at once, but she was succeeding in pushing the branches away from her. Iceman too was keeping them at bay. He had surrounded himself with a field of intense cold, which rendered the living wood brittle and allowed him to snap anything that ventured too close to him.

In fact, it was Cyclops himself who was the least equipped of the three to deal with this threat. Effective as his optic blasts were, he could only shoot at what he could see. And, almost as if the vegetation could sense this, it launched a concerted attack upon him from behind. Before Cyclops could turn, his arms were bound to his side, and a creeper had wrapped itself around his throat and was squeezing tight. He gasped for breath as he clawed at it. By the time he had ripped it loose, more tendrils had seized his feet and pulled them from beneath him. He toppled sideways, landing awkwardly and still breathing heavily. He tried to stand, but he was already held fast. He found himself staring into the violet center of a flower with lime green petals. And, suddenly, the petals opened outwards

and the flower puffed a sweet-smelling gas right into his face.

He was caught by surprise, unable to stop himself from breathing in until it was too late. He opened his visor again and pulverized the flower, but the smell of the gas was already overpowering, and he could feel himself beginning to black out. He could sense Jean's concern through their permanent telepathic link, but there was nothing she could do. She was weakening too. And Cyclops could feel himself being pulled into the soft earth, and he almost welcomed its embrace as he sank into a dreamless sleep.

Wolverine cut a swathe through the living forest like an angry whirlwind, running too fast for the trees and shrubs to fully react to his presence before he had passed, lashing out with his claws at any branch or creeper that was still able to get close to him. The vegetation around the Blackbird's landing site had been too damaged to pose a threat. But a telepathic distress cry from Phoenix had alerted him to the perils elsewhere.

He hadn't stopped to think. She was nearby, and she was in trouble.

If Wolverine was at all disappointed to find that Phoenix had summoned him on her husband's behalf, rather than her own, he didn't show it. He didn't let himself think it. He took in the situation at a glance. Cyclops had already sunk halfway into the ground. He was asleep, and Wolverine's keen sense of smell told him why. The green-and-red flowers were pumping an anaesthetic gas into the atmosphere. It had affected Phoenix and Iceman too: they were groggy, but at least they were still standing, and still fighting. And Storm was already on the scene, having flown ahead. She had summoned a fresh breeze that was dispersing the gas before it could do more harm.

Wolverine leapt towards Cyclops, but a tangle of vines reared up before him, and he lost precious seconds as he hacked his way through it. By the time he reached the spot

where the X-Men's leader had been, only his yellow-gloved hand was still visible, protruding forlornly from the ground. And, even as Wolverine reached for it, it sank beneath the surface.

He dug with his claws, carefully at first but more frantically as he realized that Cyclops was already deeply buried. Phoenix lent him a telekinetic assist, having extricated herself from her own predicament. But the more dirt they shifted aside, the more poured in to replace it, and their hole remained stubbornly shallow. Wolverine took a step back, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation—and, within seconds, the hole had been filled. There was no way of telling that it had ever existed.

A heavy silence fell. Storm landed quietly beside her teammates, and the X-Men stared at the ground and considered their loss. The plants were no longer a threat, although some broken branches and shredded vines still thrashed helplessly as if in death-throes,

"I can't feel Scott in my mind any more," said Phoenix, in a distant, hollow voice.

"Doesn't mean a thing," said Wolverine. "In case you ain't worked it out yet, whatever's down there is shielded from your telepathy."

"You're right," said Phoenix, with a determined nod.

"We assume that Cyclops is unharmed until we see evidence to the contrary," said Storm. As the X-Men's deputy leader, it was up to her to take command now.

"Fair enough," said Wolverine, "but I think there's more bad news on the way."

The others looked up, only now seeing what Wolverine had scented seconds earlier. Rogue had stayed behind with the Blackbird, to look after the unconscious Nightcrawler. She flew towards them now, and the elf was not with her.

"The earth just swallowed him up," she explained, apologetically. "I tried to keep hold of him, but it was too

strong. If I hadn't let go, he would have been tom down the middle."

"We're getting creamed," grumbled Wolverine. "Two people down, and we ain't even seen the enemy yet."

"Then it is past time we took this fight to them," announced Storm. "Clearly, it is too dangerous to travel through the forest on foot. We will take to the air, and search for sites where their helicopter could have landed."

From below, Tessa was still watching.

The X-Men had destroyed or disabled several of the flower cameras, but there were many more. The computer told her that Cyclops and Nightcrawler had been brought to the base. She had transmitted an order to a team of Hellfire Club agents, to collect the anaesthetized heroes from their arrival bays and to take them to the holding cells until she was ready to deal with them. She concentrated on tracking the flight path of the remaining five, allowing herself a smile at the thought of what lay in store for them.

The Kree's security systems had been effective so far. But their greatest defense-their most powerful weapon-had yet to be employed.

When the Kree had abandoned this island base in the distant past, they had left a custom-built guardian behind: a mechanical life form, fitted with the strongest armor and the most devastating weaponry that their advanced civilization had developed. It had gone now-but the base still housed its repair facilities, and its schematics were still held in the computer's databanks. Sebastian Shaw had hired some of the world's foremost robotics experts. They hadn't been able to duplicate the life form exactly—some of the materials hadn't been available, and they hadn't entirely grasped the complexities of its artificial brain; their version was less independent, more robotic— but they had come up with something almost as formidable.

The X-Men were approaching the entrance to the base.

It was time, decided Tessa, to bring the Sentry into play.

“This must be the place,” said Phoenix. They were standing in a tiny clearing, towards the forest’s edge. She could tell that it was man-made, quite recently. The stumps of felled trees were still new. The ground was strewn with rocks, but a space had been cleared. A makeshift landing pad, she reasoned. The helicopter itself had probably been taken underground by some means. Like Kurt and her husband.

“It is,” said Wolverine. “It’s thick with the stench of Hellfire Club goon. I’ve got McCoy’s scent too. A few hours old.” He crouched down and snuffled his way across the clearing, like a sniffer dog. Phoenix wasn’t surprised when the trail led him to the area’s most notable landmark: a freestanding spire of rock, about four feet tall, surrounded by smaller stones at its base. “It ends here,” said Wolverine. “Looks like we’ve got our way in.”

He sniffed at the spire, and then-seemingly satisfied that there was no danger—took hold of it and pulled. And pushed. And twisted. Nothing happened.

“I guess they’ve locked the secret door behind them,” said Iceman.

“I’ll take a look,” offered Storm. Wolverine stepped back, deferring to her experience. As a poor child living on the streets of Cairo, before her mutant gene had manifested itself, Ororo Munroe had been forced to steal to survive. Amongst the skills she had had to learn during that time was an expertise in defeating all kinds of locks.

It took Storm mere seconds to uncover a small hatch set into the spire. She pried it open to reveal a recess filled with circuitry and wiring. “It is activated by an ultrasonic signal,” she reported. “However, I believe I can disengage it.” She reached for the set of picks that she kept in her belt, and lowered one carefully towards the electronic lock.

The other X-Men withdrew, so as not to distract her from her delicate task. Phoenix cast an eye around the clearing, and reassured herself that no further threat was about to

make itself evident. She had every confidence in Storm's abilities.

But then something unexpected happened.

Black bolts of electricity exploded from the spire. Storm cried out in surprise and pain, her body arcing backwards as it was flung away. More bolts flew out, apparently at random. Phoenix leapt for cover behind a tree, and a bolt just missed her. It crackled into the ground, and left behind a sizzling pool of mud.

Rogue was hit. She winced and fell to her knees, but her tough skin spared her serious harm. Iceman wasn't so lucky. With its shell of ice, his body was a natural conductor. He screamed as he was hurled back against a tree. He slid to the ground, but Phoenix was relieved to see that he was still conscious, albeit shaken.

The stones at the base of the spire were moving. It took Phoenix a moment to realize that something was pushing them up from below. As the metal-framed structure revealed itself, she saw that it was an entranceway. She could see steps leading down behind it.

And something was coming up those steps. Something big.

Phoenix took stock of the situation. Storm was down; she had taken the brunt of the electrical attack. Iceman needed time to recover. Rogue was back on her feet. And Wolverine was already rushing headlong to meet the enemy.

It was humanoid, mechanical, and about fifteen feet tall. It had to bend almost double to get through the entranceway, and that was when Wolverine hit it. His senses must have confirmed that it wasn't a living being, for he sliced savagely at its chest with his claws. Outside of one of his berserker rages—and he had those more or less under control these days—he wouldn't normally have attacked an unknown foe with such ferocity. A human being would certainly have been killed. But this adversary was barely scratched.

Out in the open now, it drew itself up to its full height. It was a bulky, imposing figure. Its armor was tinted red around its head and torso, light blue around its limbs. Twin nodules protruded from each side of its head, resembling malformed ears, and a crude approximation of human features had been carved out of the blue metal of its face. The robot's mouth was set into a thin, angry line, and its eyes were covered with black plates, which gave the ludicrous impression that it was wearing sunglasses. Nevertheless, combined with its unchanging expression, they served to emphasize its dispassionate, uncaring nature. Phoenix shuddered involuntarily. She hated robots.

You couldn't read their body language, couldn't predict them, couldn't reason with them. It was worse for her: with most people, even if she wasn't actively reading their minds, she received a background buzz of psychic chatter, some confirmation that they were alive and thinking. With a robot, she felt nothing. Just a cold, empty void. And against a robotic adversary, her telepathic abilities were useless.

She remembered where she had seen this particular model before. She was well aware of the Kree, of course-not least because of the X-Men's connections to their sworn enemies, the Shi'ar. And Jean had always lived by the axiom that it paid to be prepared. She had learned all she could about the Kree's incursions into the affairs of Earth. If certain government officials only knew how willing some Avengers were to open their restricted files to a band of mutant outlaws, they would have had conniptions.

It's a Kree Sentry, she telemented to the others. It has built-in weaponry. It's fast and it's strong, and it's pretty near invulnerable.

'Pretty near,' Wolverine sent back, *that's what I like to hear, Red!*

He attacked the Sentry again, aiming for its arms and legs this time. They must have had less protection than the chest, as his claws left silver scratches. Still, it was hardly

significant damage. And the Sentry was preparing to fight back. It raised its huge arms, bunched its fists and brought them down together. Wolverine leapt out of the path of a blow that made the earth shake, blasted dust into the air and almost knocked Phoenix over. She held onto a tree to steady herself, and struck back. Her enemy might have had no mind for her to attack, but she still had her telekinesis. She tried to reach inside its casing, to find wires and components to pull apart. A gentle force repulsed her, and she felt as if she were trying to run through a mattress. The casing was shielded from mental attacks.

Rogue took to the air and swooped past the Sentry, delivering a powerful punch to its face. Knowing how strong she was, Phoenix was dismayed to see that the automaton was unfazed. Indeed, it reacted quickly enough to take a vicious swipe at its flying opponent, almost hitting her. With her mind, Phoenix lifted the heaviest rock she could find, and hurled it at the Sentry's head. It crumbled into fragments, but this too had no visible effect.

Nevertheless, Wolverine took advantage of the twin distractions. He ducked and dived between the Sentry's legs, never staying in the same place for more than a fraction of a second, getting blows in when and where he could. Phoenix held her breath as the Sentry lifted a giant foot and drove it down, and Wolverine only just rolled out of its way. For an instant, he was down and helpless, but Rogue saw the situation and flew right at the Sentry's hooded eyes, making herself a more enticing target. "What's wrong, sugar?" she taunted, as she struck another resounding blow. "Can't find someone your own size to pick on?" The Sentry didn't respond, even though Phoenix was sure that it should have had a voice.

It swung at Rogue again, but Phoenix helped her out with a concentrated barrage of small rocks. She aimed for the plates over the robot's eyes, hoping at best to knock out its optical sensors and at least to obstruct its vision

temporarily. Emboldened by this, Rogue turned and launched herself on another attack run. But, as if it could sense her rather than just see her, the Sentry struck out with its fist and knocked her right out of the air. Rogue plummeted into the surrounding trees, and Phoenix couldn't see where she had landed although she could sense from her thoughts that she was more stunned than hurt.

There was a method, she realized, to Wolverine's apparently random strikes. He was aiming the majority of his blows at the same spot, at the top of the Sentry's right leg. And it was working. He was beginning to cut into the metal.

Iceman was on his feet, although he still looked unsteady. He brought his hands together to point at the Sentry, and unleashed a stream of ice that coalesced into a solid lump around its head. It would have been an effective strategy against a human target. But the Sentry didn't need to breathe, and the ice didn't bother it at all. It focussed its attention upon Wolverine, and its chest-plate opened outwards to reveal the huge, round muzzle of what could only have been a weapon. Wolverine hadn't seen it—it was some way above his head—but Phoenix's telepathic warning alerted him in time. With no more than a quick glance upwards, he ducked and sprang aside as the muzzle pivoted down towards him. But it had a wider field than he had anticipated. The air itself seemed to explode, and Wolverine was caught by the edge of the ferocious blast and knocked sideways. Only then did the Sentry reach up with both hands and, with an almost casual squeeze, shatter the ice in which its head was encased.

In the meantime, Iceman had aimed a jet of snow into the muzzle of its weapon, effectively blocking it. He poured layer after layer of ice on top of it, before the Sentry had time to close its chest-plate. Then he gave a startled cry as the robot thundered towards him, with a speed that belied its size. He tried to jump out of its way, but he must still

have been dazed from the black electricity, and he wasn't fast enough. The Sentry floored him with a single swipe from its great fist, and Phoenix knew he was out for the count.

It turned towards her, then: the only X-Man left standing'. She ran first one way and then the other, but it bore down upon her unerringly.

Then Rogue shot out of the trees, like a bullet from a gun, and hit the Senti from behind just as Wolverine charged it from the side. Both heroes had obviously gotten their second winds. They grappled with the robot, long hours of training allowing them to coordinate their attacks without having to exchange words. Phoenix felt a thrill of elation as they threw it off-balance and it toppled backwards, falling with an almighty thud that made the ground tremble again and dislodged leaves from the branches above her head.

But the danger wasn't over yet. The Sentry activated its weapon again. A deep groan emanated from its inner workings, and Phoenix allowed herself to hope that Iceman's blockage would do its job; that the weapon would backfire.

Instead, icy shards erupted from the Sentry's chest. They couldn't penetrate Rogue's hide, but they cut thin lines across the exposed parts of Wolverine's face and arms. It was nothing his mutant healing factor couldn't handle, but he was momentarily beaten back. Rogue aimed blow after blow at the Senti's head, but it shrugged off the onslaught. It was already climbing back to its feet, and its right hand shot out, enormous fingers circling Rogue's midriff. She struggled to break free, but to no avail. The Senti squeezed her, tighter and tighter, until Phoenix felt her mind surrendering at last.

By this time, the automaton was fully upright again, and Wolverine had renewed his assault, aiming for the same spot as before, on its right leg. His claws struck blue sparks from the metal, and finally penetrated the casing: just a small hole, but it was enough. It was the opportunity that

Phoenix had been waiting for: a gap in the psi-resistant armor.

She entered the gap with her mind, and sent a tendril of psychic force snaking up the Senti's leg and into its abdomen. She pressed on upwards, feeling her way around its inner workings, but its brain-box was a long way up, and the further she ventured inside the shielded casing, the more extreme was the effort required.

In the meantime, with a casual flick of its wrist, the Sentry had tossed the unconscious Rogue aside. Unaware of Phoenix's actions, it had logically shifted the whole of its attention to Wolverine, its most persistent foe. This time, he was ready when it used its chest weapon—he somersaulted out of its way, but he was back before the echoes of the blast had died down—but even he couldn't stay out of the reach of those powerful fists for much longer.

Phoenix had reached the Sentry's chest cavity. She might have been able to deactivate its weapon, but that would have alerted it to her telekinetic presence. It was best, she thought, to trust Wolverine to keep it occupied, for just a minute more. She struck out for the throat, but her head was beginning to ache now. Sweat dripped into her eyes, and she sagged to her knees and pressed her hands to her temples, trying to block out the pain even though it was inside her. If her concentration wavered now, all would be lost.

If she could just... push ... a little bit... further...

But then, the moment that Phoenix had been dreading arrived at last. The Sentry caught Wolverine a glancing blow, and he fell. He lay, stunned, on his back, still conscious but in no position to defend himself. The Sentry stood astride him, and the muzzle of its weapon pivoted downwards again. Phoenix was sure he couldn't survive a blast from that range.

She had to act now.

She gritted her teeth, and drove the psychic tendril up into the Sentry's brain, despite the shrieking protestations of her own. Blinded, gasping for air, she fumbled for something, anything, to pull apart, to twist, to rend, to damage in any way she could. Something gave, but she didn't know what. She felt as if she were passing jolt after jolt of electrical current through her brain. She let go, screaming, and sprawled face-first into the mud, no longer able to control her muscles, to even raise her head.

She passed out, not knowing if she had done any good.

At first, Tessa didn't know what was happening. The Sentry put its hands to its head, in an almost human gesture of anguish. Then, with no more warning than that, it collapsed. Even Wolverine was hard-pressed to get out of its way before he was crushed beneath its weight.

The X-Men had destroyed the Hellfire Club's greatest weapon, and Tessa wasn't even sure how they had done it. She felt a pang of consternation, but she reassured herself that there was no cause for alarm. The robot had defeated Storm, Iceman and Rogue-and Phoenix, she now saw, was also down. That left just one. And, of course, she had taken precautions against even such an unlikely event as this. Tessa never left anything to chance.

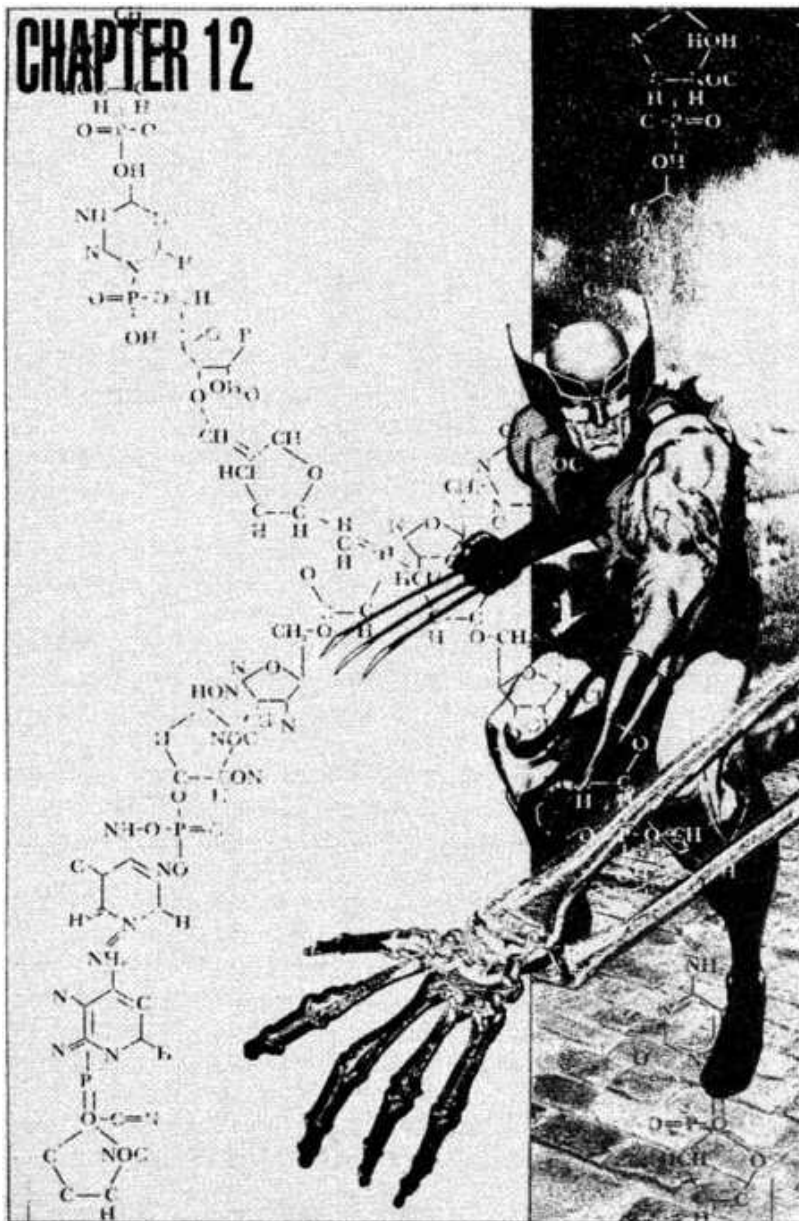
She watched on her monitors as six Hellfire Club agents rushed out of the base. They dropped to their knees, brought their machine guns up to their shoulders and strafed the clearing at chest height. Wolverine, naturally, was already back on his feet, avoiding the bullets with superhuman speed and dexterity, and taking the fight to his attackers. The first agent fell, with triple claw marks across his chest. Tessa wasn't concerned. The outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion. She had staged it only to provide a short delay.

She abandoned her post at the Kree computer and walked confidently, unhurriedly, down the stark, gray corridors that led to the base's main entranceway. By the

time she had climbed the steps to the surface, her agents were all down—she had expected no less—and Wolverine was crouched by Phoenix's side, trying to coax her awake. His costume was torn, and rivulets of blood stained his face from wounds that had already healed. He smelt Tessa coming and looked up at her with a scowl on his face and murder in his eyes.

She reached into his mind as he came at her, claws extended. He had been trained well. His psychic blocks were better than any she had ever encountered in a non-telepath. But he was tired and hurt, and it was a simple matter for Tessa to turn his brain off.

She allowed herself a smile of quiet satisfaction as the last X-Man fell at her feet.



CYCLOPS WOKE, his limbs feeling heavy and his head feeling light, and the first thing he realized was that he couldn't sense Jean's presence in his mind any more.

He denied himself a small pang of fear, and concentrated on getting to his feet, on forcing his tired eyes to open so he could see where he was and take appropriate action.

He felt embarrassed at having been felled so easily. He was worried about the other X-Men.

He felt alone without her.

The room in which he found himself was red. Very red indeed. At first, he assumed his vision was still blurry, that he wasn't focussing past his visor. Cyclops was used to seeing the world through a scarlet haze. But no, it was different this time.

He took a few steps forward, reached out and touched a wall that felt like multi-faceted glass. Red, multi-faceted glass. He turned around, hoping to find something, anything, to suggest that what he feared wasn't true. But the redness surrounded him.

He cut loose with his eye-beams, but he wasn't surprised when the walls simply swallowed them, as darkness swallows light. The walls themselves were translucent, but opaque enough to deny him a glimpse of what might lie beyond them. He stared at a thousand images of his own worried expression, reflected to infinity and all washed in red. He wondered how much a prison like this would cost, and then remembered who he was dealing with: the owner of Shaw Industries, Black King of the Hellfire Club and one of the richest men in the world. One of the few men who could afford to manufacture a giant ruby quartz crystal.

Ruby quartz: the substance from which his visors-and his glasses, when he wasn't in costume—were made. The only substance that could keep his destructive power in check.

Nevertheless, Cyclops opened his visor again and pivoted slowly on the spot, in a full circle, testing every square inch of the walls, floor and ceiling. The crystal glowed a brighter red wherever it was hit, but showed no signs of breaking. He had to accept that his powers were useless to him in here. But that didn't mean he was beaten.

He couldn't see any kind of opening. But logically, there had to be one. He spent the next several minutes running his hands patiently over every surface-even the ceiling, which he could just about reach if he stood on his tiptoes. He was searching for a hidden mechanism, or even just a

seam in the crystal to show that a door existed. He found nothing.

Which left only one option: brute force.

He removed his boot and struck with the heel, as hard as he could, again and again at the unyielding red wall. Intellectually, he knew it was hopeless. It would have taken somebody of Rogue's strength to smash through ruby quartz, and even she would have found it difficult. But if he could just find one flaw, one stress point in the crystal....

To his elation, he felt something give way. A thin crack spread across the red surface, and he set to work with renewed strength, concentrating his blows upon the same point, smiling as ruby shards flaked away to collect at his feet. The more he worked, the faster his progress became. Within minutes, layers of crystal were shattering like glass with each swing of his boot, and even before his flailing fists. Shaw must have cut costs, used imperfect materials.

At last, Cyclops punched his way through to air, whereupon it was the work of just seconds to widen the hole, to propel himself through the disintegrating red barrier, one arm in front of his face to protect his exposed skin. He couldn't see where he was going-and he was hardly likely to take any prospective foes by surprise. So, he had to be ready for anything.

But he was not prepared at all for what greeted him on the far side of the wall.

He had broken through to another cell exactly like the first. Another giant ruby quartz crystal. Another room with no doors.

And as Cyclops stared, aghast, at his own myriad reflections, he thought he could hear Sebastian Shaw's rich, mocking laughter echoing from the red walls.

Storm woke to the dark, and a stifling atmosphere which stirred an old fear.

She was lying on her back on a hard wooden surface, her arms folded across her chest, her skin dry and hot and

prickling, her own breath loud in her ears. She stirred and felt more wood, hemming her in on each side. She reached up, but there was wood there too. It was only an inch or two above her upturned face but, in the absolute darkness, she couldn't see it.

Goddess, don't let this be!

A wooden box.

No. Something worse.

She reached past her head, but felt more wood. She stretched out her legs and kicked at yet another wooden surface. It surrounded her, confined her, and took her back to the worst hours of her life.

She fought down a rising tide of panic. She had confronted and beaten this phobia before. She could do so again. But had she ever really vanquished it, or had she just learned to cope? Had she only sent the fear to lurk in the shadowy corners of her subconscious mind?

She pushed frantically against the box's upper surface—the lid of the coffin, she knew with a cold, sick certainty—hoping against hope that her worries were unfounded. But the lid didn't budge. Something weighed it down.

They had buried her alive. Encased her in wood and left her to rot in the earth.

She screamed and thrashed, and brought her full strength to bear on the walls of her cramped prison. The release of emotions was cathartic, but ineffective. She forced herself to calm down, before she exhausted her scant reserves of air. She closed her eyes—although open or closed, it made little difference—and breathed, slowly and deeply, concentrating on the gentle rhythm and trying to forget where she was. She pictured herself in the African rainforest, and tried to imagine she was still there, enjoying her years-long respite from a life of hardship. Before Professor Xavier had brought her back to painful reality.

Instead, her thoughts drifted back to an even earlier time.

She was five years old, lying in the rubble of her house in Cairo, pinned by fallen beams and choking on thick dust. Her mother lay beside her, battered, bloody and deathly pale. Ororo Munroe screamed her throat raw, and cried until there were no tears left. Then, at last, she allowed the pain and the dizziness to reclaim her, and drifted into a restless sleep.

She never saw her mother again. Nor her father, whose last words to her had been that he would protect her, protect them all, as the fighter plane had careened towards them.

He had lied.

The fear had crept up on Storm again. Her heart raced, and she was on the verge of hyperventilation. She gritted her teeth and scolded herself inwardly. She was not five years old now. She would not let this scar from her childhood, this irrational claustrophobia, defeat her. The rescue parties had overlooked her then, salvaging her parents' corpses but leaving young Ororo sleeping. She had had to dig her own way to freedom, even though it had taken long, hard, suffocating hours. She could do it again.

She reached out with her very soul, working blindly, trying to shape weather patterns that she could neither see nor feel. Perhaps she wasn't too deeply buried. Perhaps she could turn the soil above her head to mud, wash some of it away, give herself a chance to break free. But as more time went by, the air in her coffin grew staler, and Storm couldn't even hear the rain and the thunder and the lightning that she thought she was bringing down.

She kept on trying. What else could she do? Perhaps, at least, a freak rainstorm might alert somebody to her plight. It might bring help.

From down here in the darkness, though, there was no way of telling.

"Incredible!" breathed the Beast. "Amazing, stupendous, sensational!" His borrowed white lab coat billowed out

behind him as he leapt across the laboratory, ricocheting off the wall and coming to rest beside a laser printer, which was spewing out paper like tickertape. He glanced over the freshly inked numbers, even though he had just seen them on a computer screen. Then, with a whoop of delight, he performed a standing backflip, bounced off a desk and landed back where he had started, at Rory Campbell's side.

"I take it you're impressed," said Campbell, with a raised eyebrow.

" 'Impressed' would be a major understatement of my condition of exuberance," Hank assured him, sorting frantically through a stack of papers on the bench in front of him, scribbling notes on some with a red ballpoint pen, which he produced from behind his ear. "I had no idea the Kree had carried out so much research into the human genome. Why, the work they've done with the Inhumans alone-the records they've kept here on the long-term effects of their genetic experimentation-it's as if I've spent the last few months fumbling my way around a forest in the dark, and somebody has just handed me the map."

"A partial map, at best," said Campbell.

Hank refused to be daunted. "To substitute another metaphor, then, it's as if I've found a dozen missing pieces of a jigsaw. Not enough to complete it, perhaps, but at last I can see what the picture ought to be." To himself, he muttered: "As soon as I get a few spare weeks, I have a lot of reading to catch up on." Aloud, he said: "In the meantime, you and your people have done some very useful number crunching with this remarkable computer."

"You think we might be heading in the right direction?"

"Oh, I do, Doctor Campbell, I most certainly do. The Legacy Virus was specifically designed to attack the mutant gene, to catalyze a reaction that eventually causes total cellular collapse. If we can change the nature of the gene, and consequently of that reaction. ..." He let out a whistle at the sheer possibilities. "Moira and I pursued a similar line of

research some time ago, but came up against what we thought were insurmountable obstacles. If only we had known then what you know now....”

He bounded across the room again, startling Doctor Scott as he dropped a sheaf of papers into his arms. “Very impressive, my friend, very impressive. I’ve made a few corrections to your calculations and marked some areas you might wish to pursue further.” He moved on, making similar observations to Takamoto, encouraging Travers to rerun some tests and pretending not to notice that all three of the scientists regarded him with open resentment.

“You know, I’m actually beginning to see a solution to all this,” he said, pacing the room fretfully. “Ideally, of course, we should have some Inhumans here to examine first-hand.”

“I’m sure Shaw could arrange it,” put in Campbell.

“No, no, no,” said the Beast hurriedly. “I think we’ve all seen quite enough of our kind benefactor’s recruitment methods.” His words were meant at least partly for the others, but he had his back to them and couldn’t tell if he had made an impression or not.

“The computer’s database has all the information we need,” said Campbell.

“Indeed it has. I would have liked to have run some empirical tests, that’s all. Still, no matter. We have been given the opportunity to take some bold steps forward. We should take it. You’ve already carried out trials on the alpha and beta vaccines?”

Campbell nodded. “Mr. Shaw donated a few pints of mutant blood.”

“His own?”

“Fitzroy’s. The results were informative, but not very encouraging.”

“With the alterations I’ve suggested—and with a modicum of for-tune-we might be able to change that. I’ll need to see those figures.”

“I’ll get them for you,” said Campbell.

“I do hope I’m not interrupting.” The Beast recognized the voice before he turned to face its owner. Sebastian Shaw stood in the doorway, wearing his usual old-fashioned attire and his usual smug expression. Hank hadn’t heard him enter.

“As a matter of fact,” he said shortly, “you’ve distracted me from a very delicate stage of my calculations.” It was partially true: he had a thousand figures and as many possibilities running through his head. The real problem, however, was that the mere sight of Shaw had dampened his ebullient mood.

For the past few hours, he had immersed himself in work, forgetting all else. The Legacy Virus was the most knotty problem he had ever had to face, and to see those knots unraveling at last had been a wondrous experience. After too long, he had begun to rediscover the joys of scientific achievement. Now, all he could think of was the circumstances under which those gains had come about, the compromises he had made.

“I don’t suppose there have been any sightings of my teammates?” he asked.

“None,” said Shaw.

Hank nodded. “They’ll be here, sooner or later.”

“I don’t doubt it. I know how persistent your friends can be.”

“And I’d like to talk to them when they arrive.”

“Yes, I think you should.” Hank was surprised at Shaw’s willing agreement to his demand. He raised an eyebrow, and the Black King elaborated: “The X-Men have a tendency to—how shall I put this?— break things. It would be a shame if they were to end this project before you had a chance to explain its importance to them.”

“I shall certainly endeavor to do so,” Hank rumbled.

Shaw hesitated for a moment, then, as if unsure whether to say more. However, he turned and left without a further word, and the Beast watched him go with a despondent sigh.

He wasn’t looking forward to meeting the rest of the X-Men. He feared that they would react as Moira had, when they learned what he was doing-and he couldn’t face

explaining himself again. Not yet. He didn't want another argument that he wasn't sure he could win.

Perhaps if they could stay away for a little longer, just until he had something more tangible to give them, some proof that he had made the right decision ...

Campbell reappeared at his elbow and, without a word, handed him a manila folder crammed with paper: the file he had requested. Hank opened it and looked at the top sheet, hardly taking in the words and numbers upon it, unable to recall his enthusiasm of just a moment earlier.

He turned slowly, examining his surroundings as if for the first time; as if only now realizing the possible consequences of the deal he had made.

Doctor Takamoto looked quickly down at her work before his gaze could meet hers-but not quickly enough to conceal the naked hatred in her eyes.

Wolverine's cell was a large, white room, and somebody had left the door open.

There was only one problem. He wasn't the room's only occupant.

Standing between him and the door-through which he could see only a gray corridor wall-was a silver, skeletal figure. In fact, Wolverine realized, it was a perfect human skeleton, of a short man, fashioned from metal. *Not another flaming robot*, he thought.

As if sensing his interest, the figure dropped into a combat-ready crouch. Wolverine wasn't sure how it could move at all without joints or muscles, but it could. He circled it warily, and it shifted its position to follow him around the room, always staring at him with the blank eye sockets of its leering skull, always blocking his path to the door.

All right, bub, thought Wolverine, *if that's how you want it!*

He extended his claws, only to hear the familiar *snikt* sound repeated a half-second later. A feral smile spread across his face as he saw what had happened. Three claws,

identical to his own, had extended from the backs of each of the figure's hands.

Cute, Shaw. Very cute!

So, not just a human skeleton, then. A replica of his own skeleton. And sheathed with the same near-invulnerable material?

There was one way to find out.

The skeleton made no attempt to evade Wolverine as he rushed it. It simply braced itself for the impact, then lashed out with incredible speed and matched him blow for blow. It was strong—far stronger than its spindly frame suggested—and it had all his moves. It was like fighting a taciturn, scrawnier version of himself. His claws clanged against the skeleton's bones without damaging them, confirming his theory that, like his own, they were laced with adamantium. But, unlike his opponent, Wolverine had flesh to cut, blood to spill.

He winced as he took a deep gash to his side. He fell back and, to his surprise, the skeleton let him go. Clearly, it was programmed to leave him alone so long as he didn't attack it, and so long as he wasn't trying to get to the door. *Your first mistake, Shaw!* he thought. The skeleton had shredded what little had been left of his costume above the waist, but his body was healing. He could feel the pain in his side receding, and new skin was already growing over some of his more shallow cuts. He flung the remnants of his mask aside and flexed his fingers. Seconds later, not only restored to full health but with the experience of his first defeat to inform him, he hurled himself at his opponent again.

With the same result.

For a second time, Wolverine withdrew, wiping blood from his face with the back of his hand, his heart burning with a rage that he knew he couldn't afford to surrender to.

When his healing factor had done its work again, he tried a different approach.

He ran at the skeleton a third time, and it dropped into its usual defensive stance. But, instead of attacking it, Wolverine leapt over it, performing a handspring off its shoulders.

For an instant, the open door beckoned to him.

But, before he had even landed, the skeleton pivoted and knocked his legs from under him with a sweep of its arm. Wolverine landed heavily, and the skeleton stood astride him. It lashed out with its claws, and he knew he had given it the opportunity to drive them through his heart. But it simply cut his skin, and, once again, allowed him to scramble away from it, beaten.

On his fourth attack, Wolverine grabbed the skeleton's wrists and concentrated on keeping its claws away from him. He grappled with it, forcing it around until he had his back to the door. Then he pushed it away from him and turned to flee, but the skeleton had anticipated this move too, and it leapt on him from behind and wrestled him down.

On his fifth attack, he used his claws again and simply tried in vain to outfight his opponent, because he had to let off some steam.

And, somewhere between the sixth and seventh attacks, he succumbed to the voice in his head. The voice that told him that the skeleton was too good at predicting his moves, at countering them. And that the way to beat it was to become more unpredictable.

His eighth attack was the most brutal and sustained yet. A red mist descended over Wolverine's eyes, and he punched and slashed at his android foe with no regard for the injuries he was taking in turn. He had no intention of disengaging again, but the skeleton made the decision for him. It lifted him bodily, and hurled him away. He got to his feet, let out an animal roar and immediately rushed back into the fray.

He had lost count of the number of attacks he had made when the skeleton finally punched him too hard, and he

slipped into unconsciousness.

An indeterminate time later, he woke to find his injuries all but healed, his heart rate slowed and the crazy fog lifted from his mind. The skeleton had returned to its guard position, the door still temptingly open behind it. Wolverine regarded it through hooded eyes, and it glared back at him sightlessly.

He began the process all over again.

The corridor was lit only dimly, by a blue-tinted source, which Nightcrawler couldn't see. He could barely make out his own threefingered hand in front of his face, but this was quite normal. His body was melting into the shadows, as it always did.

He spread his arms and found that, as expected, he could touch the dull, gray metal walls on each side of him simultaneously. That wasn't good. Nor was the fact that the ceiling was low, only a foot or so above his head. He felt hemmed in.

In front of him, the corridor turned to the left. Behind him, it passed the openings of three side passages-two the left and, between them, one to the right-before it stopped short at a T-junction. In all, six possible directions to take.

He turned around and scuttled along the right hand wall, because it was as easy as walking on the floor and it might just allow him to avoid a trap or take a foe by surprise.

He paused as he drew level with the first opening. He found himself looking down another long passageway, with more junctions at irregular intervals along it.

A maze, then.

Despite the possible perils of the situation, Nightcrawler found himself grinning. He enjoyed this sort of challenge.

He took the right turn, and the first right after it. He came to a crossroads, at which he headed right again. This took him up a blind alley. He checked the wall at the end of it, just in case it was an illusion or it concealed a secret door. There was nothing.

He tried taking every first left turn instead, but soon became convinced that he was walking in circles. He considered pulling a thread off his costume, to mark his path. Perhaps later, he thought, if things became desperate.

He felt a surge of triumph as he sighted something in the distance: a narrow flight of metal steps, twisted around a pole. He teleported towards it in his eagerness. It led both up and down. He climbed up first, and was dismayed to find himself in a corridor identical to the one he had come from. Climbing down, he found the same. He returned to the highest level, guessing that his objective was more likely to be above than below. When he found another, identical ladder a few minutes later, he climbed that too. And another. And another.

Nightcrawler lost track of the time he had spent wandering the dark corridors. He tried to keep walking in broadly the same direction, and to move up through the levels of the labyrinth whenever he was able. But he never reached its outside edge, nor its roof. Finally, to confirm his suspicions, he dropped a white handkerchief onto the metal floor in the center of a corridor. He found it again, half an hour later, three floors and almost two miles away.

He had only one option. He had realized this some time ago, but he had wanted to be absolutely sure before he committed himself to taking such a risk.

Somehow, this labyrinth was confounding his senses, clouding his thoughts, sending him around in circles without him knowing it. It wasn't a fair challenge. But he could teleport out of here. The problem was, it would have to be a blind 'port. He had no destination to visualize, no idea if he was ten yards inside the labyrinth or ten miles. And, under those circumstances, he could easily find himself trying to occupy the same space as an unexpected wall or a piece of furniture. Nightcrawler swallowed at the very thought. He had no choice but to do this-he knew that-but he also knew he might be about to commit suicide.

He closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, and focussed on a virtual spot one mile straight up from his present position. At least, this way, he could be sure of clearing this maze with its dangerously narrow corridors and low ceilings. Of course, it also meant he was more likely to find himself in a fatal plunge towards the roof of whichever building he was in.

Nightcrawler let out a therapeutic yell as he made the 'port.

When he opened his eyes again, he was standing with his nose pressed against a cold metal wall, and he recoiled from it with a startled gasp ...

... to find, to his despair, that he was still inside the labyrinth.

Rogue was floating.

At first, she thought she was underwater. Her lungs balked at the act of respiration, and she suffered a minor coughing fit.

Somehow, though, she could breathe.

The liquid around her was green-tinged, cold and, apparently, super-oxygenated.

It was also full of people.

They stretched for as far as she could see—which wasn't too far, through the murk—in all directions, in rows and columns, all floating upright as she did, all unconscious, arms limp by their sides. Their heads tilted forwards at identical angles, their chins resting on their chests. Their faces were composed into identical expressions of contentment.

They *were* identical. Dozens of identical men with the same short, sandy hair, the same bland features, the same slight dimple in each of their chins. Rogue wondered if they were all clones.

The identical men were all naked. She realized, with a start, that she was too.

Automatically, she folded in her arms and legs, looking around warily in case any of the men came towards her. If she touched one-even brushed against him-with her bare skin, her mutant ability of absorption would kick in.

She needn't have worried. The men weren't moving. They remained in their perfect rows and columns, not even drifting. But this gave Rogue a problem: how to get past them?

There was space between them, but not a great deal. She could swim through it, but only if she kept tight control over every movement of her body. Could she do it? She was used to fighting with strength, not precision. And the consequences of failure terrified her. All those people, all those personalities, those ideas and emotions. She shuddered at the thought of them invading her mind, destroying her sense of self.

Best, perhaps, not to take the chance; to stay where she was.

Or was that what her captors wanted her to think?

Whatever these things around her were, they weren't real people. They were artificial life forms, grown in a laboratory. What if they were empty vessels, with no thoughts of their own? What if it was safe for her to touch them after all? What if the only thing keeping her here, floating in this tank or whatever it was, was her own paranoia?

It wasn't the most convincing argument, but it was enough to persuade Rogue that she had to take a risk.

She kicked out tentatively, and sent herself drifting upwards. It didn't feel like swimming, more like maneuvering in zero gravity. Fortunately, she had been trained to do just that. She floated between two of the clone men, her arms above her head, heels pressed together. She even pulled in her stomach, taking up as little space as she could. She resisted the urge to close her eyes, to prevent

herself from seeing if this all went wrong. Never before in her life had she felt so exposed, so much in danger.

She took a deep, calming breath as she came face to face with one of the clone men, her nose inches from his. Her first impulse was to flinch, but there was an identical man only the same distance behind her. The first man's eyes remained closed, his expression unchanging. Tiny bubbles emerged from his mouth as he breathed out gently.

Rogue had stopped moving. She gave another tiny kick, as soft as she could manage, and resumed her slow rise. She didn't even dare to look up; she just hoped that, soon, she would bump into a roof. One with a hatch in it, preferably.

And then, to her horror, she realized she was drifting off-course. Almost touching one of the clone men, she back-pedaled frantically.

A little too frantically.

She felt the awful press of skin against her skin—a bare foot against her back—and she screamed as a thousand unwanted thoughts flooded into her mind. She recoiled instinctively, only to collide with another clone. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes, and tried not to let the images of other lives, the opinions of other people, affect her; just let them sluice through her mind without *changing* her. Her body spiraling out of control, she touched another man, and another, and suddenly a dozen more voices were shouting to be heard, protesting at what she was doing to them and at the same time assailing her with their mundane lives, and she couldn't stand it any more.

With a yell of pain, Rogue lashed out. She didn't care how hard she hit the men, she just had to get them away from her. She created a space for herself, but at the expense of adding a few new voices to the cacophony in her head. She hardly knew who she was any more. She curled into a ball and tried to find an essential, inviolate part of herself upon which she could focus, to tune out all else. She didn't want

to listen, to think, to feel. All notions of escape were pushed out of her mind as she drifted in the greenish liquid and sobbed quietly to herself.

"I think we've done it," whispered Rory Campbell. "We've actually done it."

The five scientists stared up in awe at the wall-mounted main screen of the Kree computer. Travers, Scott and Takamoto crowded around the Beast in their eagerness to see, their hostility towards him temporarily forgotten in the sheer excitement of discovery.

"Let's wait and see how the simulation plays itself out," Hank cautioned, although he could feel the same excitement building within himself.

The screen displayed a graphical representation of a human blood cell. It was stained around the edges, as if somebody had injected black ink into the cytoplasm. And the ink spot was wriggling, reaching out towards the center of the cell, trying to grow. But it wasn't succeeding. Its questing tendrils were blocked by a similarly amorphous white blob, its equal and opposite. And, as the two forces met in combat, they were canceling each other out, until only the healthy cell remained.

"It's unbelievable!" said Campbell. "All the time and effort we put into finding a cure, and you come along and finish the job in a matter of hours. Doctor McCoy, you are a genius!"

The Beast waved aside the compliment, graciously. "You would have reached this same conclusion sooner or later. Your team had already laid the groundwork. I was simply able to utilize my experience to build upon it all the faster." His experience, he thought, refreshed by Moira MacTaggert's purloined notes of their research together. He felt a twinge of guilt. "I should also remind you that this is only a computer projection. We have months of trials ahead of us before we can even think about testing our formula on a living subject." He looked up at the screen again. Both the

black and white stains were appreciably smaller.

“Nevertheless,” he said, “I think I can safely state that congratulations are due.”

The last remnants of black and white merged, and blinked out in a final whimper of mutual destruction. Professor Travers drew a sharp breath, Rory Campbell laughed giddily, and Doctors Takamoto and Scott began to applaud. Hank felt like throwing his arms around all four of them, but restrained himself. Even in their present mood, that might not have gone down too well.

“My fellow scientists,” he announced, “I believe we have found our cure.”

Iceman was standing on a circular white platform, only inches above the ground, in a circular white room. The wall was about thirty feet away, and it rose towards a white dome about ten feet above his head. There were several doors, evenly spaced around the wall. He could see nothing amiss, nothing to stop him from just walking away. So, every fiber of his being told him that this had to be a trap.

He ‘iced up’ with a thought, surrounding himself with his customary protective shell. When the trap was sprung, he would be ready. At least, as ready as he could be.

“I hate this!” he said, to fill the unnerving silence. “I hate it when the bad guys have watched too many episodes of *Batman*. I hate it when they build these elaborate prisons. I mean, why go to all this trouble just to make our lives miserable?” No answer came, but for the echo of his own voice from the blank walls.

The platform itself was suspicious. “No prizes for guessing that, whatever’s gonna happen, it’ll happen the second I step off this thing,” he considered. He reached out with a tentative foot, but snatched it back. “On second thought, let’s show a tiny bit of caution.”

Iceman rarely gave much consideration to the mechanics of his powers. He just used them. He didn’t think about how he was condensing moisture from the air—nor about how, in

that same instant, he was draining every iota of heat from a small, localized area. As far as he was concerned, he was just doing something that came naturally: he was making ice cubes. And, once they were made, he sent them skittering and bouncing along the white floor.

“And, to my immense surprise, nothing happens. Perhaps I got this place wrong after all?” He thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Nah, I don’t think so!”

Still, there was only one thing to do, much as he disliked it.

He extended his leg again and, this time, he let his foot touch the floor.

Immediately, the room was filled with fire.

With a strangled cry, Iceman leapt back, almost falling. The fire burnt fiercely, giving off waves of heat that began to melt his armor, but it didn’t touch the platform.

Then, in the space of a second, it died down and went out altogether.

He looked around, wide-eyed, but he couldn’t see where the flames had come from. From beneath the floor, he guessed, although he could see no gaps in the smooth surface. Nor were there any scorch marks, nor lingering traces of smoke. Iceman entertained the possibility that the fire had been an illusion. But he had felt its heat against his face, and he saw now that there was nothing left of his ice cubes. They had melted.

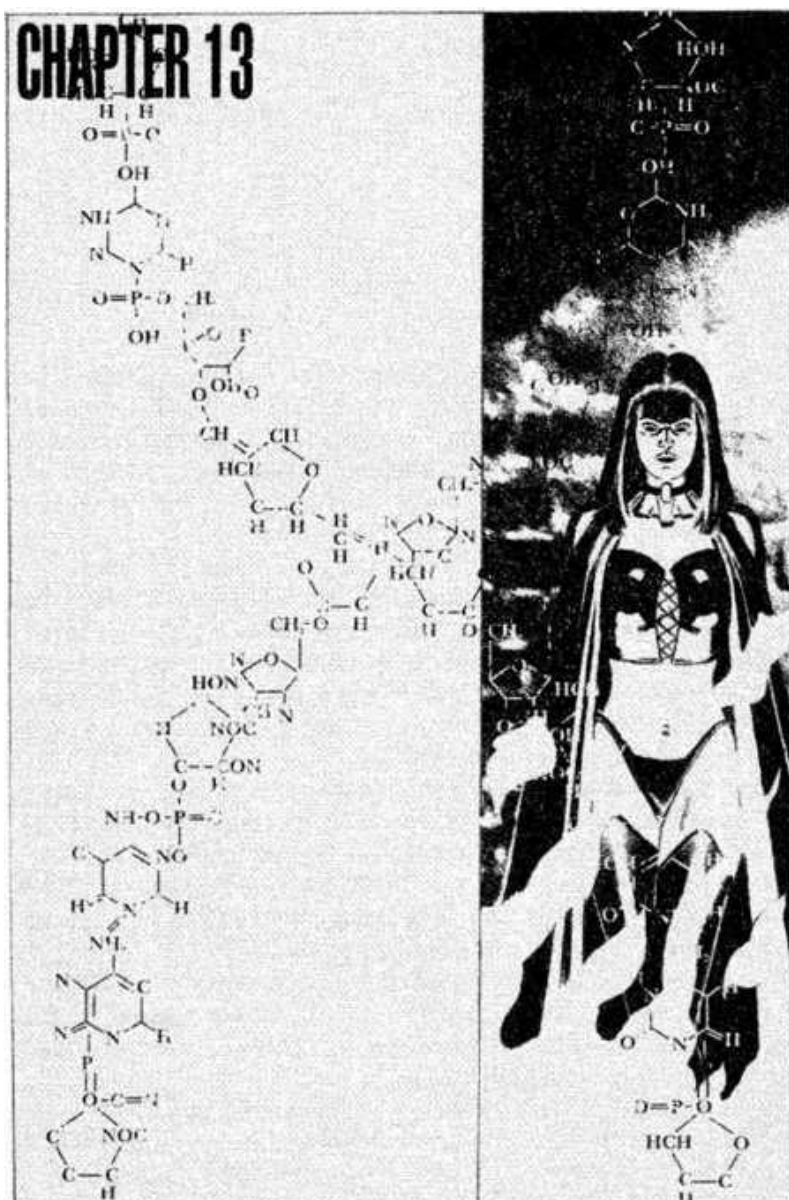
“OK,” he muttered to himself, “if the ' is pressure-sensitive...

He created an ice slide: a cantilever structure, anchored to the platform. The far end of it was within reach of a door handle. But, as soon as he took his first cautious step along it, the fire erupted again, its flames touching the ceiling. This time, as it beat him back, he lost control of his armor altogether, and he was just plain, helpless Bobby Drake, cowering from his natural enemy, sweat running down his brow.

The fire was extinguished again, and Bobby felt a shiver of fear running through him. The slide had gone. Not just melted but evaporated, leaving only a misshapen lump of ice on the platform itself. What would happen to him, he wondered, if he was caught in that furnace? If he tried to make it all the way to a door? He could reach one in seconds, using his powers to replenish a slide beneath him as fast as it could be melted. But what if he wasn't strong enough? What if he couldn't keep his protective shell up all the way?

No, he decided, sitting down on the platform, knees up against his chest and arms around his knees. It was too much of a risk. He didn't have that kind of control over his powers. He wasn't good enough. He couldn't make it out of here alone.

It was up to the others to find him.



JEAN GREY'S head throbbed. She had expected that, but the pain was worse than it ought to have been. She had over-extended

— herself, overtaxed her powers, but it wasn't for the first time, and

it had never felt this bad before. She could taste blood on her lips, and she realized it had trickled down from her nose. She feared she might have done herself some permanent damage.

But that possibility was the least immediate of her problems.

She was lying on a hard rock surface, staring up at the roof of a rough-hewn cavern, which was held up by granite pillars. The air was hot and dry, and the back of her throat felt like parchment. Carefully, she eased herself to her feet, carrying her head like a fragile egg on her shoulders. She took a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at the blood on her face.

It took her a moment to realize that she shouldn't have *had* pockets. She had been wearing her Phoenix costume when she was felled, but now she was in her own conservative civilian clothing: a smart, gray jacket and skirt, over a turquoise blouse. She remembered how Selene had altered her attire in New York, and she wondered if the Black Queen was in league with Shaw after all.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Jean saw there was only one way out of the cave. The flickering light of flames glowed in the jagged opening, and she crept towards it, poking a cautious head around the corner of the slime-encrusted rock.

She gasped at the sight of an enormous pit of fire, from some medieval vision of Hell itself. It was crisscrossed by crumbling stone walkways, which in turn were guarded by malformed gargoyle statues. The infernal vista stretched for as far as Jean could see. She heard a papery rustle of batwings, and a sinister shadow slid across the roof. Somewhere, somebody was screaming, and somebody—or something—responded with a demonic cackle.

"Where am I?" she whispered, in awe and horror.

She jumped, as the answer leapt into her head from nowhere. *Where do you think?*

The voice was Jean Grey's own. Or rather, it wasn't.

I thought you'd be familiar enough with this place, cow. Look into your subconscious, your repressed memories.

You've been here before. We both have. We've both returned from death.

I never died! she insisted, ramming the words home with telepathic force.

Time to remedy that, then.

Jean could see her now, standing on a walkway in the middistance, hot smoke and glowing ashes roiling in the air behind her. It was like staring into a funhouse mirror, at a woman who should have been her twin, but who looked very different. Madelyne Pryor: the erstwhile Goblin Queen, the current Black Rook of Sebastian Shaw's Inner Circle, and the living embodiment of everything Jean Grey had ever feared she could become. She was a nightmare in a black leather bodice, her garb reminiscent of Selene's, the Hellfire Club's trident symbol embossed upon a clasp at her throat, and a smile of pure evil darkening her face.

Madelyne was walking slowly, confidently, towards Jean. Jean stayed put and let her foe approach her, but she was nervous. As she had noted before, Madelyne's powers were equal to her own. In this unfamiliar realm, she might even have the advantage.

You had your crack at life, you witch, said Madelyne Pryor's voice, full of hate, in Jean Grey's mind. *You screwed it up. You don't get another chance. You don't get to take my life!*

I didn't take anything from you!

"You took *everything* from me!" spat Madelyne, near enough for her voice to carry now. "This should be my time, not yours. It will be my time again."

"So, you want to kill me," said Jean. She struggled to keep her own voice from trembling. She wasn't afraid of dying in combat, not really. But she was chilled by the thought of what might happen after her death (of *what happened last time*, screamed a part of her mind, which she tried to tune out). She couldn't stand the idea of Madelyne

walking back into her life and taking it over, taking her place with

Scott. Logically, she knew it couldn't happen. She knew Scott better than to think he could ever go back to his first wife, no matter how much he might be hurting. She had to keep telling herself that.

"It won't make a difference," she insisted, out loud. "You think that, with me out of the way, you can just waltz in and replace me again? It won't happen, lady. Not this time."

Madelyne was nose to nose with Jean now, and the X-Man braced herself for an attack, trying to clear her mind. "I'm putting things right," snarled the Black Rook, "putting things back the way they should be. Me up there, and you down here."

And suddenly, the world itself twisted around Jean, and the rock wall behind her reached out to push her onto a walkway, which bucked and rotated beneath her. She tried to steady herself, but a gargoyle flew at her, its grotesque face leering at her and its stone wings beating in front of her eyes, and she couldn't hold on.

It all happened in an instant. She had no time to react, to fight back. Jean Grey couldn't even draw breath to scream, as she was plunged into the fire.

"Mr. Shaw? Sebastian?"

Tessa leaned forward in her seat and waved a hand in front of her employer's eyes. He was sitting behind his desk, elbows resting upon its metallic top, fingers pressed together in front of his mouth, and his thoughts had evidently drifted far from this basic underground office. Tessa was used to seeing him in a contemplative mood, but rarely this distracted.

He focussed back upon her, shifted his position and smiled slightly, as if trying to show her that everything was all right, that he was still in control.

"There isn't a problem is there, sir?" she asked. "Nothing I should know about? I thought everything was going

according to plan now.” “Inasmuch as it can,” he sighed, “with the X-Men here. They may be helpless for now, but they do have a rather irritating penchant for throwing spanners into my works. Perhaps Fitzroy was right. Perhaps it would be safer to kill them.”

“You still need Doctor McCoy’s cooperation,” she reminded him. “Do I? Perhaps it’s time to accept that the risks of having the Beast around outweigh the benefits. Doctor Campbell and the others may be able to complete his work now.”

“But what if they cannot?”

“You’re right,” conceded Shaw. “I can’t take that chance. I want this cure, Tessa, and I won’t allow my enemies to keep it from me. Not even for a day.” He looked at her sharply. “If we could tell McCoy that his teammates were here ...”

She shook her head. “No. Not until he’s ready. We discussed this before, sir. The Beast isn’t sure enough of his own motives. If he talks to his friends now, they will almost certainly dissuade him from helping us.”

Sebastian seemed to accept this point, but Tessa could sense his impatience seething just below the surface. “We can do nothing, then, but wait,” he concluded, “and hope that time proves to be on our side. Madelyne has assured me that she can keep our guests in line for as long as may be necessary.”

A look of distaste crossed Tessa’s face, before she could stop it. Sebastian saw it, and regarded her through hooded eyes. “You don’t care much for our Black Rook, do you?”

The comment surprised her. He knew full well her feelings about both Pryor and Fitzroy—and Selene, for that matter—but he had never brought up the subject openly before. This project meant a lot to him, she realized, and his anxiety was prompting this unusually reflective mood of his. She decided to take full advantage of the opportunity. “No,”

she said. "She'll betray you, Sebastian. She'll turn on you, like they all do."

"Perhaps."

"She's using you. She's only interested in becoming the Black Queen in Selene's absence. Once she has that, she'll have no further use for you."

Sebastian didn't argue. He seemed to consider her words for a moment, then the metaphorical shutters came back down over his eyes, and Tessa knew he would pay no further heed to her advice. Perhaps, at least, he would think about what she had said. She got to her feet. "If there's nothing else, sir, I thought I might take a walk downstairs myself, make sure everything is as it should be."

Sebastian nodded. "Yes. A good idea, Tessa. Leave me to my thoughts."

She did so, wondering as she walked briskly through the Kree installation whether she had told him anything he hadn't already known. Sebastian might have let Madelyne Pryor into his bed, but his heart was far more carefully guarded.

The exasperating thing was that it didn't seem to bother him. It was as if he was happier knowing that Madelyne probably *was* plotting behind his back, because at least he could understand that. He could relate to her, deal with her, predict her actions, more easily than he could with an altruist like Moira MacTaggert. They were kindred spirits.

On the base's lowest level, Tessa passed two Hellfire Club guards and opened three doors one by one, checking inside three small, cubic rooms. Each one was devoid of furniture. In the first, Wolverine, Rogue and Storm were sprawled across the floor, all still unconscious. Wolverine's muscles were twitching, and he was muttering curses under his breath. Rogue was rolled into a ball, sobbing. The second room was occupied by Cyclops, Nightcrawler and Iceman. Their positions hadn't changed at all since she had last looked in on them.

In the third and final room, Phoenix lay on her side, also out cold. Beside her, sitting cross-legged on the hard, metal floor, was Madelyne Piyor.

The Black Rook's eyes were closed too, but she was smiling.

The flames licked around Jean, but didn't burn her skin.

She rose on a column of hot air, to face her tormentor. Behind her, one of the stone walkways exploded; her doing, more for effect than for any practical reason.

"The Phoenix rises from the flames," noted Madelyne. "How apposite!" And indeed, Jean was now wearing her Phoenix costume again.

"Did you think you could fool me?" she cried. "Did you think I wouldn't realize where we were, what this place is? The astral plane was my domain long before you came along!" She was angry, mostly with herself. She really hadn't put two and two together before now, which was almost unforgivable for someone of her experience. Her only excuse was that her head was still pounding, and she wasn't thinking straight. She had to pull herself together.

"Your domain no longer," hissed Madelyne. "You've been unconscious for a long while, Jeannie." She said the name with a snarl. "While your mind was hiding itself in its protective shell, I was making preparations. You aren't fighting on home turf any more." She gestured with one hand, and another walkway uprooted itself and crumbled into fragments, which flew toward her enemy's head. Phoenix concentrated, stealing their momentum until they hovered in midair. Then she reversed their direction, and sent the makeshift missiles toward their creator, but Madelyne disintegrated them without apparent effort.

Phoenix feared that her doppelganger had a point. Here, in the virtual realm, the power of the mind was all that counted-and she was still groggy, dazed from her battle with the Kree Sentry, whereas Madelyne was fresh and hungry and ready for this. Jean could already feel stone fists closing

around her ankles, pulling her down, and she had to fight to remain aloft. If she fell into the fire again, if Madelyne gained the upper hand, then the flames might scorch her this time. They might even kill her.

“You’re all alone, Jeannie,” taunted Madelyne. “No Nathan Grey or Scott Summers to help you this time. No one to save you.”

“My teammates. What have you done to them?”

“Imprisoned them,” she said, with a boastful laugh. “I’ve trapped them in self-defeating mental prisons of their own creation. Their cells are the products of their own imaginations, their own fears. They don’t believe they can ever break free, and so they won’t. It would never have worked on you, though. You required my personal attention.” Phoenix had been pulled down almost into the flames again—but by giving her foe an opportunity to gloat about her own cleverness, she had gained time to compose herself. The certainty that she would never have fallen for such an obvious ploy herself, that she wasn’t vain enough, also comforted her and gave her strength. Madelyne Pryor wasn’t like her at all.

“You may have wormed your way into my mind,” she swore, “but you’ll never defeat me here!” She was taking control now. She could *feel* everything around her, every molecule in the cave walls, every flicker from the fires below. She could feel them, and manipulate them according to her own desires. She was all-powerful, invincible. It was a heady, exultant sensation, and she almost lost herself in it as she freed herself and reshaped Madelyne’s own flames, directing them to raze her world of thoughts to the ground.

And then, the Black Rook hit her with a mental image: herself, as Madelyne Pryor was seeing her now. A fierce creature in human form, its face dark but its eyes alight with lust, as it hovered in the center of a shape sculpted from the flames themselves: a fiery phoenix, like the one upon her chest. The symbol of the force that had once consumed her.

No, she told herself, almost desperately, not me! And this image isn't real. This is Madelyne's doing.

An image from your thoughts, an image from mine. Does it make any difference?

"Yes!" she screamed, and the twisted walls cracked open. Water cascaded into the cavern, putting out the flames, as Jean Grey—and her clothes were Jean Grey's again now—leapt at Madelyne Pryor, and knocked her over with the sheer force of her will.

The walls around them had dropped, the fire had been extinguished and they were clinging to a sturdy rock for dear life, lashing out at each other as and when they could, swept along in the deluge. "You hate me so much," snarled Madelyne. "You wish to deny me my very existence. But I'm a part of you, witch. I'm inside you. That's why you can't face me. And it's why you'll never beat me, never be rid of me!"

"You're wrong. You're twisted. I won't become like you. I *can't* become like you!"

"Like me? Or like the Phoenix? You've even taken its name for yourself. It's inside you, Jeannie. The taint is inside you. I know it, you know it."

They were pitched onto a muddy bank, and the river ran on by them. They grappled with each other in a primeval landscape, the earth dark and wet, jagged forks of lightning sundering the blood-red sky. And although their struggle was, in reality, mental not physical, Jean could feel her heart pounding, her muscles pumping, and adrenaline surging through her system.

"And the longer you deny it," spluttered Madelyne, choking on mud, "the more strength it will have when you're finally forced to set it free. Like I was. Like the Phoenix force was."

Jean slammed her into the ground, winding her, and wrapped her fingers around her throat. She wanted to shut her up, to stop the painful words. Madelyne Pryor wasn't

her. The Phoenix force hadn't been her. Their crimes, their failings, their hungers had been their own. But the words continued inside her head: *Let it out, Jeannie. Give in to your dark side. Become me!* And she was no longer sure if they came from Madelyne or from herself.

But she was sure of one thing: that there was only one way to stop them.

Her grip on Madelyne Pryor's throat tightened.

Rory Campbell had left, to deliver a printed report of the scientists' encouraging findings to Shaw. The rest of the team had gathered in a small annex off the laboratory where they could relax, fix themselves drinks and talk. Hank hadn't been invited to join them, and he chose not to gatecrash their celebrations. He sat alone in the lab and listened to the distant mumbling of their voices, their tones more optimistic than he had heard them before. Travers was looking forward to seeing his grandchildren again. Scott just wanted to be reunited with his wife.

Takamoto dampened the mood by reminding them that, as Hank had already said, there was still a long way to go before they held a fully tested cure for the Legacy Virus in their hands. Scott pointed out that at least there was an end in sight now, a chance of surviving this and getting back home. But he sounded considerably less hopeful now.

Hank knew how he felt. After the excitement of a few minutes earlier, reality was beginning to sink in again. He sat on a tall, wooden stool, rubbed his tired eyes and began to really think—because he had run out of excuses not to~about what he was doing here. He remembered what he had said to Rogue, in the Blackbird, on the way back from Newhill to Muir Island: "I pride myself on being a man of words, a man of science—and yet I appear to be most at peace with myself when I can attack a problem with my fists!" His greatest fear had always been that the mutation which had turned his body into that of a beast would eventually do the same to his mind. Was that what was

happening here, slowly but surely? Was that what he was doing? Giving up on the intellectual struggle, because he would rather be engaged in a physical one against Sebastian Shaw and his cohorts? What if the X-Men couldn't do anything and Shaw ended up as the sole possessor of the Legacy cure, as Moira had suggested? The possible ramifications hardly bore thinking about. But were they any worse than the ramifications of doing nothing, of allowing this disease to run rampant?

Even now, with a cure within his reach, Hank ached inside at the knowledge that there was still so much work to do, and that more people would die before it was done.

He looked up as Campbell walked back into the room, Shaw at his side. The Black King was grinning from ear to ear, and Hank wanted to punch the smile off his face. He grimaced and forced himself to overcome the primitive, brutish instinct.

Campbell ran through the computer projections with Shaw, and Hank peered over his shoulder, watching for the fifth time as the black and white blobs fought and neutralized each other. The sight still gave him a thrill of excitement, despite himself.

"Our serum," Campbell explained to his attentive employer, "works not by targeting the Legacy Virus itself, but rather the very gene it was designed to attack."

"The mutant gene," said Shaw.

"Exactly. We aim to give it the ability to fight back."

"How so?"

"Over a period of several days, the serum-aided by a course of radiation treatments from Kree machinery—will catalyze a fresh mutation in the gene, evolving it into a kind of super-cell, which in turn will sponge up the virus and overwrite its effects on the DNA sequences, before regressing to its original state. That's what these graphics represent."

"A complete cure, then," mused Shaw. "With no side-effects?" "None at all."

"At least," Hank interjected, "that's the theory."

"But the computer," said Campbell, "predicts a 100% likelihood of success."

"The outlook is promising, I grant you," said Hank, "but no computer, not even an alien one, can fully predict all the effects of a serum like this one on the human body. We will have to conduct an extensive battery of tests."

Shaw shook his head. "We don't have time."

"We don't have a choice!"

Shaw turned back to Campbell with a thoughtful expression. "Are you telling me this serum of yours will only work on somebody with the mutant gene?"

"Initially, yes. Indeed, it has to be a mutant who has only recently contracted Legacy. His DNA still has to be relatively uncorrupted for the serum to stand a chance of working."

"However," said Hank, "once we have facilitated the development of this super-cell within our first patient, we can isolate it before it burns itself out, and reproduce it in a laboratory."

"That way," said Campbell, "we can short-circuit the process in future patients by injecting the super-cell directly into the bloodstream."

Hank took up the baton again. "By which means, we ought to be able to cure those in whom the disease is more advanced-along with baseline humans, of course."

Shaw nodded curtly. "I've heard enough, gentlemen. So, what we need now is a mutant test subject, correct?"

Hank narrowed his eyes. "I don't think you were listening closely enough, Shaw. We aren't ready to try out the serum on a living being. The possible consequences—"

"The certain consequences of delay," Shaw interrupted, "are that people will die. This isn't up for discussion, Doctor McCoy. I will not wait any longer than I have to."

“Perhaps we could find a volunteer,” said Campbell, trying to keep the peace. “I mean, it’s difficult to identify Legacy in its earliest stages, I know, but if we could find someone—”

Hank shook his head, still glaring at Shaw. “But it might be a long search. No, Doctor Campbell, I don’t think that’s what our impatient benefactor has in mind at all. I think he’d rather save time by creating a suitable guinea-pig for us. Isn’t that right, Shaw?”

“You mean ...” Campbell glanced at Shaw, nervously. “You mean by infecting a healthy mutant with Legacy?”

“What’s wrong, Doctor Campbell?” asked Hank. “He’s already infected three humans, without appearing to distress you unduly.”

“I didn’t know ...” stammered Campbell, looking between Hank and Shaw, obviously wanting to refute the allegation but not sure if he should speak out in front of his employer. “I mean, I didn’t know he was going to ... to ... I didn’t approve ..Until now, Campbell had gone about his work in a resigned, businesslike fashion. Only now did Hank realize that he must share his own deep reservations, at least to an extent.

“It’s your choice, gentlemen,” said Shaw abruptly, heading for the door. “By chance, I happen to have seven suitable subjects for experimentation housed in this very base, should you require them. Alternatively, you have four hours to explain how else you intend to deliver a working cure to me within the next fortnight.”

“Seven subjects?” Hank repeated, feeling a sudden sense of dread, which quickly turned into anger. He had been lied to again. “Shaw!”

Shaw paused in the doorway and looked directly back at Hank, a malevolent gleam in his eye. “But that’s your deadline, gentlemen. Four hours, no longer. And then, we’ll do it my way. We’ll test your serum on a member of the X-Men.”

Iceman was cramped and restless, and becoming more anxious by the minute. He paced up and down, and walked impatiently around the small circular platform-but he had precious little space, and he could only succeed in making himself dizzy.

He didn't know how long he had been here, but it felt like a long time.

What if the other X-Men weren't coming? What if they were all trapped in cells like this one? What if they were all waiting, like he was, for somebody else to rescue them?

What if it was up to him to do something after all?

He scowled, and resisted the unpleasant notion. "It can't be up to me," he muttered under his breath. "It can't be my responsibility." One of the others would escape. One of the stronger X-Men. Storm, perhaps, or Phoenix or Wolverine. But a little voice inside his head told him otherwise. He *was* one of the stronger ones, it told him; one of the strongest mutants alive, if only he could accept the fact. But he didn't want to hear it.

He looked at the doors around the circular room, so close but unreachable. He even formed another ice slide, towards what he judged to be the nearest exit by a fraction, but the very act of doing so made his heart beat faster with fear.

He could do it. He could get out of this room. It would be the work of seconds. The flames would hardly touch him. They couldn't get through his protective ice coating.

No, he couldn't. It was too far. He wouldn't be able to keep his armor up all the way. The heat would melt it, and his slide, and then his skin and bones. He wasn't strong enough.

He put one foot on the base of the slide, not far enough along to activate the flames. An idea occurred to him, and he walked to the opposite edge of the platform. He could run across it, and then along his frozen construct, picking up some precious extra momentum before he crossed the

platform's edge. He could shave a vital half-second off his time.

He almost went for it, he really did. But something paralyzed his legs: the part of himself that knew he was weak, the part that knew— no matter how many times he was told otherwise—that his power was useless, childish, no more than a gimmick, good for snowball fights but not much else.

The moment passed, and Iceman returned to the center of the platform. He sat down again and looked at the slide, his path to free-dom-and the door, so close to him.

But so far away.

Jean pulled away from Madelyne, breathing hard, appalled at herself, appalled at what she had thought of doing, however briefly. She could see the marks left by her fingers, vivid red against the white skin of her enemy's throat. This wasn't her, she told himself. That evil witch had got into her mind, perverted her thoughts. The battle had only been a distraction.

"Go on then," challenged Madelyne Pryor, "do it! Kill me! Because I swear to you, Jean Grey, that, as long as I live, I'll haunt you. I will fight for the life you stole from me!" But there was disappointment in her eyes, for she, like Jean, knew the moment had passed.

"I wanted to," she breathed. "More than anything, I wanted to do it. You did a good job on me, Madelyne. You made me fear my future, what I could become. You made me want to destroy you, as the symbol of that fear. And then you would have won, wouldn't you? Then I would have become you." She didn't reveal how hard it had been to pull herself back from that brink. But she had managed it, and she felt a new strength for having done so.

She looked at her twin, still lying in the mud, and she almost felt sorry for her, with her half-life and her longing to become something more than a shadow. And she realized

she would never again be afraid of Madelyne Pryor. Not like she had been.

“I’m not you, Madelyne,” she reiterated—and, for the first time, she believed the words herself. “And I’ve told you before, I won’t become like you. You can’t make me doubt myself. I know who I am.” With a hint of pity, she added: “I hope you can say the same, one day.”

It was too much for Madelyne. With a cry of rage and frustration that was more animal than human, she leapt to her feet and launched herself at Jean, who was ready for her.

The two women grappled, Jean employing all her mental strength to protect her from her foe, who was fighting more savagely than ever before. This time, however, no words were spoken, no taunts or insults hurled.

The time for talking was past.

Tessa had had an idea. She had worked out how to solve her employer’s problems.

For once, she hadn’t told Sebastian about it. It was important that he should be able to retain plausible deniability. He would have to assure the X-Men that he hadn’t authorized what she was about to do—and to be telling the truth, because Phoenix would detect any lies. He needed to be able to persuade the Beast that nothing had changed, that the unfortunate actions of one disobedient subordinate shouldn’t keep him from concluding his research here. He might even have to issue his assistant with a reprimand. But, secretly, he would be pleased with her work, unsanctioned or not, because, by taking the initiative, she would have given him what he wanted.

Sebastian’s greatest worry was that the X-Men would interfere in his plans. But he couldn’t do anything to harm them himself, because he needed the Beast’s help.

So, Tessa would act in his stead.

She passed the guards again, and stood outside one of the cells, using her telepathic abilities to eavesdrop upon

the thoughts of the three men within. They were still trapped inside their mental prisons. Nightcrawler had become disheartened, but he hadn't given up. He still wandered around his gloomy labyrinth, looking for a way out. Cyclops smashed his way out of his fourth ruby quartz cell, refusing to surrender, refusing to believe that there wouldn't be an end to this madness. By contrast, Iceman was resigned to his fate, accepting that he could never leave his room of fire without help.

Tessa had to admit, begrudgingly, that Pryor had done her job well. But, as Sebastian himself knew, the X-Men could never be underestimated. They had escaped from seemingly inescapable situations before. It would only take one of them to break the Black Rook's mind-grip-or for Pryor herself to lose the upper hand in her ongoing battle against Phoenix. It behooved the Hellfire Club to be prepared for such a possibility, to guard against it.

Tessa unbolted the cell door, and entered. She took a pair of silk gloves from her pocket, and slipped her fingers into them. Then she produced a clear plastic bag, which she opened to reveal two items that she had taken from the vault in Sebastian Shaw's office, while he had been absent. She removed them carefully.

One of the items was a large, stoppered vial, which contained a transparent liquid. It looked harmless enough, but Tessa held it gingerly away from her. The liquid was swarming with viral cultures, and she was determined not to let a drop of it touch her skin. She wouldn't even breathe in its fumes if she could help it.

The other item was a syringe.

It was a simple enough plan, really. Sebastian had already forced three human scientists to help him by infecting them with the Legacy Virus. She would do the same to his mutant prisoners. That way, even if they did escape, they would face a dilemma.

Tessa knew the X-Men. She knew, as Sebastian did, that they would be fully prepared to wreck this project on a point of principle; that, like Moira MacTaggert, they would rather ensure that no cure for the Legacy Virus existed than see one in the Black King's hands. But how many of them might find the choice more difficult, might even come to think as the Beast had, if they were dying themselves; if the Hellfire Club offered them their only chance of survival? It would, at least, be enough to plant seeds of dissent among their ranks.

She decided to start with the X-Men's leader. She lowered herself into a kneeling position on the metal floor beside Cyclops. She removed the stopper from the vial, concentrating to keep her hands from trembling as she did so. She siphoned a tiny measure of the clear liquid into the syringe. She didn't need much. She breathed a small sigh of relief as she sealed the dangerous vial again. Then she took Cyclops's left hand in hers, reached under his yellow glove and rolled back his dark blue sleeve. She rubbed his skin, until she could see the faint blue outline of a vein beneath it.

Then she lowered the needlepoint of the syringe towards Cyclops's arm.

"Oh no you don't, sister!"

Tessa whirled at the sound of the voice behind her. She barely had time to register the sight of Iceman, somehow impossibly awake and springing across the room, his arms outstretched, a clear shell crackling into existence around his body. She put up her hands by reflex, and the syringe dropped to the floor and rolled away, as she reached for his mind telepathically. Then something hard and cold slammed into her face.

Tessa's last thought, as she felt herself slumping forwards, black spots beginning to crowd her vision, was a simple prayer that she wouldn't land on top of the vial of Legacy Virus.

“You can’t seriously be considering this,” said Rory Campbell.

The Beast was sitting on his lab stool again, staring down at the object in his hands, and turning it over and over. He looked up at Campbell, with a melancholy expression. “Can’t I? From where I’m sitting, it makes perfect logical sense. Sebastian Shaw has us over a metaphorical barrel. If I agree to his terms, then I will become responsible for infecting an innocent mutant, and probably a good friend, with Legacy. I can’t let that happen. But what are my realistic alternatives?”

Campbell looked quickly around the room, as if fearing that somebody might be watching. Then he leaned closer to Hank, and lowered his voice. “The rest of your team can’t be more than a few floors away. We could release them.”

“I’d wager we would have to fight our way through several Lords Cardinal and sundry mercenary agents first. All the same, I am sorely tempted. The question is, could we prevent the resultant hostilities from escalating out of control?”

“If we could,” said Campbell, “we’d have everything we wanted.” Hank looked at him for a moment, wondering if this was some sort of a trick, a test engineered by Shaw. But he was doing Rory Campbell an injustice, he decided. Like Hank himself, Moira’s former assistant wasn’t working for the Hellfire Club by choice. He was working for them because he thought they could give the world its best chance of curing a seemingly incurable disease. He had just come to that conclusion a little more quickly, that was all. “We’d still have our cure,” said Campbell, “but we—not Shaw—would have control over it.” Hank thought about that, but shook his head. “As much as the possibility of such an outcome appeals to me, I can’t believe it’s very likely. If it came to a battle between the X-Men and the Hellfire Club, and if it appeared that our side was gaining the advantage ..

Campbell's face fell. "You're right. Shaw could destroy this island, the Kree computer and all our work with the touch of a button. And he'd do it too, rather than be defeated."

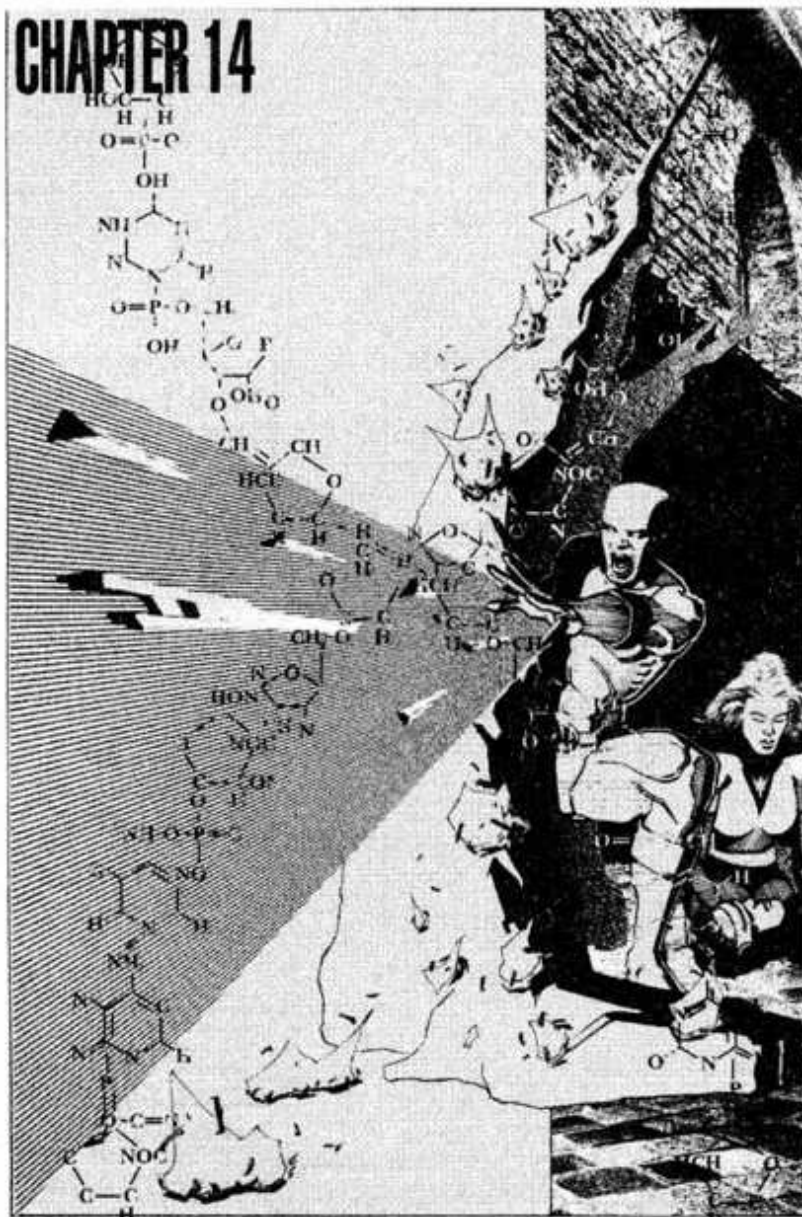
"Which brings us back to our original dilemma. Is it better for a cure not to exist at all then for one to exist in the hands of such a man?"

"And have you changed your answer?"

"No," said the Beast quietly.

"So," said Campbell hesitantly, glancing at the object in his colleague's hands: a medical syringe, filled with a clear liquid. "You're going to do it then?"

"I don't believe I have a choice."



ICEMAN WAS still shaking. He had rarely been so terrified in his life as when he had been steeling himself to race across that cir—
_cular, white room, thinking about the consequences if he wasn't

fast enough. In the end, though, once he had made up his mind, it had been over in seconds. There had been a blast of heat and a blazing light in his eyes, but he had tried to ignore both, concentrating until his head ached upon the act of creating fresh ice to keep up both the slide and his armor. He had hardly even seen where he was going.

His armor had fallen, and he had felt a tremendous heat upon his skin, but by that time he had already reached the door. And then he had awoken, in this metal-walled cell.

He smiled to himself as his fear began to wear off and was replaced by relief. He had done it. He had escaped from his prison— his mental prison, he now knew—when he had thought it impossible. And, it seemed, he was the first of the X-Men to have done so.

Cyclops and Nightcrawler were still lying on the floor, unconscious. So, rather more comfortingly, was the mutant known as Tessa. It had taken Iceman a moment, upon awakening, to adjust to the fact that he wasn't where he had thought he was. But, quickly enough, he had realized what was happening: Shaw's assistant had been kneeling beside Cyclops, about to inject something into his arm. Iceman could see the syringe now, lying beside the telepath's outstretched hand. He couldn't identify the clear liquid inside it, but it was unlikely to be anything medicinal.

He remembered Wolverine's advice about Tessa: "Trick with her," he had said, "is to knock her down before she can worm her way into your head." He had done just that, pulling no punches, hitting her with a solid block of ice, shards of which still lay on the floor around her, and glistened in her black hair. She had sustained a shallow cut to her forehead.

Iceman hurried to Cyclops's side and tried to shake him awake. When this didn't work he mischievously dropped an ice cube down his leader's back. It provoked no reaction, not even a grunt, and a quick check told Iceman that

Nightcrawler was in a similarly deep slumber. Presumably, they were both trapped in virtual prisons like his own.

He decided to find the other X-Men. Phoenix would be able to deal with this far better than he could-at least, as long as she wasn't in a comatose state too.

The door of the cell was standing open, so Iceman poked his head out into the corridor. He looked left: the passageway continued for a few yards, with more doors at each side, before reaching a dead end. He looked right: two of the Hellfire Club's mercenaries were staring at him. He ducked back into the room, narrowly avoiding a furious volley of machine-gun fire.

As the mercenaries' footsteps pounded towards him, he gave the floor inside the doorway a thin, icy coating. They ran into the room, and lost their footing. One fell on his back and riddled the ceiling with bullets. The other dropped his gun as he waved his arms frantically to keep himself upright. Iceman blocked the weapon of the former, filling its barrel with snow, in case a ricochet caught one of his friends. In the meantime, the second agent regained control of his limbs. He lunged toward the X-Man and punched his ice-encased jaw, hurting him but hurting himself more. Iceman floored him with one blow, then dispatched his partner with similar efficiency, even as he was trying to stand.

Only then did he realize that the lights in the room-and in the corridor outside-had dimmed, taking on a dull red hue. From somewhere not too far away, he could hear the wail of a klaxon. He gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath. The agents had activated an alarm. Any second now, this area would be swarming with more of their kind.

He raced back into the corridor, and to the nearest closed door. It was sealed by a pair of sturdy bolts, which seemed to have been screwed into its metal surface recently. Iceman pulled them back, pushed the door open and found an empty room. The next room was empty too. In

the next, he found Wolverine, Rogue and Storm, but no Phoenix.

He was heading further down the corridor, worried that he was about to run out of time, when he heard a scream behind him. It was a long, drawn-out scream of pain and frustration. And he recognized the screamer's voice.

"Jean!" he yelled, running as fast as he could toward the source of the noise, terrified that something dreadful might have happened to her. He shot back two more bolts, and yanked open another door. She was there all right, sitting in the middle of another small, Spartan cell, blinking and wiping sweat from her forehead. And there was somebody else too: another woman, in black leather, apparently unconscious but staring blankly.

"Jean, are you all right?"

"Never better," said Phoenix, with a faint but genuine smile. She looked down at the other woman, and Iceman started as he recognized her. Madelyne Pryor, Scott Summers' former wife and one-time member of the X-Men. Of course, he thought, she was a clone of Jean, her voice was the same. It must have been her, not his teammate, who had screamed. And that made him wonder what Jean had done to her to hurt her so much. "She attacked me," said Phoenix, as if she had picked up the thought. "We fought on the astral plane. I won."

"Look, Jeannie, we haven't got much time." Iceman reached out a hand to help her to her feet. It worried him how weak she seemed. He needed her.

"So I hear." The klaxon was still wailing.

"The others, they're trapped in their own minds somehow."

Phoenix nodded. "Madelyne told me what she'd done to them. Where are they?"

"I'll show you."

They ran back to the room that had once served as Bobby's cell. Phoenix saw Tessa, and Iceman quickly

explained what had happened. He waited at the door so he could watch down the corridor for unwelcome arrivals, as Jean went to her husband's side. She laid a hand on Cyclops's masked forehead, and her green eyes flashed red, a telltale sign that she was employing her powers. But the red wasn't as deep as usual, and, just for a second, Iceman thought he saw green again. She was exhausted. Nevertheless, she looked up at him after a couple of seconds, with a quizzical expression.

"He's built his own prison in there-under Madelyne's direction, of course. I can lead him out of it easily enough—but if she did this to everyone, then how on earth did you get free?"

Iceman shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I had more willpower than the others."

It sounded unlikely, even to him—and he was a little embarrassed to see that Phoenix clearly didn't believe it either. She frowned, and he felt her gentle presence in his mind. Then her face cleared, and she smiled. "You underestimated yourself, as usual. You only created a prison you *thought* you couldn't get out of. Luckily for Scott, you learned better."

Bobby didn't know what to say to that. He stumbled over his words, and was almost grateful when the next wave of Hellfire Club agents ran into sight, interrupting him.

He stepped out to meet them, leaving Phoenix to her work. The agents were numerous, but the cramped confines of the corridor worked to Iceman's advantage. They had to approach him two at a time, and even if they aimed over each other's shoulders, no more than four of them could shoot at once. He created a shield of ice for himself and crouched behind it, letting the nearest men expend valuable ammunition. Bullets whizzed around him, but he rebuilt the shield faster than they could chip it away.

With his enemies almost upon him, Iceman changed tack. He lashed out with a hail of ice darts. They weren't

sharp enough to penetrate the agents' padded uniforms; nevertheless, they fell back, bringing up hands to protect their eye-slits. Bobby took the opportunity to repeat his earlier trick, applying a light frost to the metal floor beneath them. In these close quarters, it only took one agent to slip and fall, whereupon he brought down another six with him. The ranks of Iceman's attackers collapsed in the middle.

He wondered how long it would take for Phoenix to wake the others. It occurred to him that he could buy some time by simply blocking the passageway with a glacier-but then, there didn't seem to be another way out of this section. The X-Men would have to break through the barrier themselves to escape, and the Hellfire Club could amass forces on the far side in the meantime. Anyway, it felt good to take the offensive. Much as he pretended not to care, a part of him burnt resentfully at what Jean had revealed.

He had been the only X-Man to overcome Madelyne's mind traps-and, secretly, he had felt quite proud of himself. Now he knew that he had only escaped because he had given himself the easiest task.

He set his jaw determinedly, and rained frozen stalactites upon the disoriented mercenaries.

"Scott!"

"Jean!" Cyclops turned, his face lighting up with hope at the sight of his wife behind him. He had been working on a fifth wall of ruby quartz crystal, beginning to feel that was no way out of here, but still driven on by his own stubborn insistence that, logically, there had to be. She had entered his scarlet-hued cell, the wall apparently peeling aside to allow her access. He strained to see through the gap behind her, but it seemed to open out onto a dark void. He frowned, and took an involuntary step away from her. "How did you get in here?"

"This place isn't what it seems."

"And what about you? Are you really my wife?"

“I can see why you’re confused, Scott. Madelyne has you doubting yourself, trapped in your own nightmares. But reach out to me. Feel my thoughts.”

Cyclops did so—and her warm, unmistakable presence rushed back into his mind, filling him with relief, joy and love. He ran towards her, and took her proffered hand.

“I can lead you out of here,” said Jean. “Everything will be clearer then.”

They ran into the void together.

Shaw sat behind his desk, his chin resting on his upturned knuckles. His eyes were closed, but he could still see the red glow of the emergency lighting through his eyelids. He was alone, as ultimately he always found himself, and his heart ached with the familiar sensation of impending defeat.

He didn’t even have to know the details of what had happened. The alarm itself was enough. The X-Men had to be free, which meant that his Black Rook had almost certainly been taken already. He hadn’t heard from Tessa since she had left to check up on his prisoners—and even at full strength, the Inner Circle would have been outnumbered anyway.

The X-Men didn’t even have to win. The fight itself would probably be enough to destroy everything that Shaw had worked towards for months. Even if it wasn’t, if there was still enough of the Kree facility left for McCoy, Campbell and the others to synthesize their cure later, then it would be Xavier’s children who controlled it. Shaw drew in a deep breath, and let out a heavy sigh at the inevitability of it all.

There was only one thing left to do. He unlocked and pulled open the top drawer of his desk. Attached to the side of the drawer, inside, was a small, metal box. It opened like a Chinese puzzle box; Shaw applied pressure to various points on its surface in an exact sequence, until the lid sprang up.

Anybody who had ever seen an action movie, or read a comic book, could have guessed the purpose of the single red button that was thereby revealed.

He could set the timer running now. Hidden explosives would destroy the base, and return the island to the seabed from which his ally had raised it, in thirty minutes. That left him plenty of time to get away, taking Tessa and the other Lords Cardinal with him if possible.

With luck, at least some of the X-Men would be caught in the explosion. The important thing, however, was that they wouldn't be able to take the fruits of his work away with them.

One touch of the red button. That was all it would take.

Then he thought about Moira MacTaggert. He thought about her determination that it was better to have no cure for the Legacy Virus than to have one exist in the hands of an enemy. He hadn't been able to understand her attitude. Now he understood it only too well. Despite the situation, Shaw smiled to himself at the irony of his dilemma. He had more in common with the good doctor than he had thought.

The sounds of battle were approaching his small office. Shaw could hear the rhythmic chattering of his pawns' machine guns, and the all too recognizable energy discharges of Cyclops's optic blasts. It was time to make a decision, time to act.

Instead he sat alone in the gloom, deep in thought, listening as his dreams were torn apart around him.

His hand rested lightly on the red button, but he didn't press it yet.

Every muscle in Cyclops's body screamed that it was tired and sore. He made himself ignore the pain. He had been asleep for hours, but a part of his mind that he couldn't control remembered his imaginary toils, and insisted that he ought to be exhausted.

An icy trickle of water ran down his back, and he wondered where it had come from.

The Hellfire Club's agents were little threat individually, well trained though they were, but they seemed impossibly numerous. For each one that Cyclops brought down with a fist or a carefully gauged blast, two more appeared to replace him. However, the X-Men's numbers were increasing too, as Phoenix woke her teammates one by one, and sent them to join the ongoing battle. Iceman, Cyclops and

Nightcrawler had already succeeded in beating their foes back to the stairs, and their progress only became quicker as their ranks were swelled, first by the addition of Storm and then by Wolverine.

Finally, Rogue came flying along the corridor, Phoenix running at her heels. *Hank's here*, Jean told the others, linking them telepathically again. *Now that we're inside the Hellfire Club's base, their psi-shielding isn't as effective. I detected his thoughts a few minutes ago.*

Where is he? asked Cyclops.

Above us. I'm still working on the precise location. I think I can sense Moira, too.

Looks like we hit the jackpot, opined Wolverine.

OK, people, Cyclops commanded, *time is of the essence. We can't let Shaw get away with his hostages—and we don't know what else he might be preparing. We need to clear a way through his goons as efficiently as possible.*

He had already gained a few steps up the staircase, but Hellfire Club agents at the next level were leaning over the railings, sighting along their rifles. They had a good vantage point; Cyclops fought to ensure that they couldn't get a clear shot at him, through their allies. Then Storm took the matter into her hands. She flew straight up the stairwell, her cloak billowing behind her and confusing anyone who tried to get a bead on her. She manipulated the air itself, to snatch the snipers' weapons from their grips.

Soon after that, the mercenaries surrendered the staircase, falling back and taking up new defensive positions on the topmost level of the base. *I've got a fix on Moira*,

reported Phoenix, as the X-Men climbed after them. *She's behind us-on the floor we've just passed. She's guarded, but only by two people. The Hellfire Club seem more intent on keeping us away from Hank. He's just above us now. And he's ivith the kidnapped geneticists.*

I'll go fetch Moira, offered Rogue. As she followed Jean's telepathic directions, the rest of the X-Men closed with their foes again. The agents were hopelessly outmatched. They couldn't even set up an effective ambush, thanks to Nightcrawler's ability to teleport behind them, not to mention Wolverine's willingness to simply run the gauntlet of their blazing machine guns, somehow reaching them unscathed. Still, for every second the heroes were delayed in their quest to reach their captured teammate, Cyclops grew more worried.

He found himself grappling hand-to-hand with a small group of agents. Three of them held him from behind, and one pulled back his head so that he was staring at the ceiling and couldn't aim his optic blasts. He kicked and struggled, determined to deprive them too of the chance to use their weapons against him. But tiredness crept up and threatened to overcome him, his head began to swim, and all the strength drained out of his limbs.

At first, he thought he was suffering a delayed reaction to his recent exertions. He concentrated on overcoming his physical shortcomings, on keeping control. Then he realized what was actually happening.

One of the agents had clamped a gloved hand onto his shoulder. Cyclops tried to dislodge it, but he was no longer strong enough. With a supreme effort, he twisted around and looked into the fervent eyes of his attacker. Despite the blank-faced mask, he knew without a doubt that he was being held by a disguised Trevor Fitzroy.

And that, courtesy of Fitzroy's energy-draining powers, he had mere seconds to live.

He tried to operate his visor, to blast the young Lord Cardinal away from him, but he couldn't even summon up the strength to close his fingers on the sensor. The world was growing dark, and it was all he could do to cry out to Jean, in his mind, as his legs turned to jelly and the floor rushed up to meet his face.

For a moment, he was lost in a forest of red-booted feet, hardly able to keep his eyes open, his entire body feeling like lead, waiting for Fitzroy to sap the last iota of his life force from him. Then something yellow hurtled over his head, he heard the dull impact of one body hitting another, and one pair of red boots was propelled away from him. Blearily, he pieced together what must have happened: Wolverine had received his psychic distress call and tackled Fitzroy, knocking him away before he could finish off his target. Cyclops mouthed a silent prayer of gratitude for the blessing of teamwork as he blacked out.

He fought his way back to consciousness, seconds or minutes later, to find that he was still on the floor and still surrounded. Now, however, he recognized the feet of his teammates. In the midst of the battle, they had gathered around him to prevent their enemies from taking advantage of his condition.

Wh-where's Fitzroy? he teleported to Jean. It was difficult even to form the words in his mind.

Wolverine dealt with him.

Is he... ?

Unconscious. Logan hit him before he could summon his bioarmor.

Satisfied, Cyclops moved to his next most pressing concern: *I can't move, Jean. Can you help me?*

She sounded doubtful. *I can boost your mental resilience. I can help you to ignore your weakness. But it won't last long, Scott. I can't affect your physical condition. Once the boost wears off, you'll be dead on your feet.*

That's acceptable. Do it, Jean!

He felt the strength flowing back into his muscles, as Phoenix stooped down and lifted him. He tried not to think about the fact that his renewed vitality was only an illusion.

The ranks of the Hellfire Club's agents were thinning out, and he smiled grimly. "We're almost there, X-Men. Let's mop up the last of these people and rescue our friend!"

The laboratory, like the rest of the complex, was washed in a dull shade of red, and that infernal klaxon alarm wouldn't stop howling.

Hank McCoy was sitting on a lab stool, looking at the main screen of the Kree computer, trying in vain to memorize as much precious information as he could. His head was aching, his stomach was churning and he couldn't bring the figures into focus. And, as the sounds of battle reached his ears, he knew that he had run out of time.

He got to his feet, and the world lurched around him. He couldn't remember ever feeling more tired. He clutched at a lab bench for support. Rory Campbell stepped forward, hobbling on his crutch, and offered him a hand, but Hank waved it away. The other three geneticists sat quietly at the far side of the room, and watched him, tensely. Nobody spoke. They looked at their mutant colleague in a new light now. They were relying on him to do something, to save the project and their lives.

Hank had gone over what he had to say to the X-Men many, many times in his mind. He couldn't get the words right.

And then the sounds of battle drew nearer, and the combatants finally spilled into the laboratory, just as Hank had always known they would.

The Hellfire Club's agents came first, fighting a rearguard action. They spread across the room, taking up the most advantageous positions, scattering papers across the work surfaces and aiming machine guns at the doors. A second later, three more agents appeared in the doorway. It took Hank a moment to see that they were grappling with one of

his teammates. Wolverine was almost invisible beneath their dark blue uniforms, but that soon changed. He hurled one of them away from him, tripped a second and grabbed the third, twisting him around so that, when the inevitable barrage of bullets came from inside the room, it was he who took the brunt of the attack. A line of red dots exploded across the agent's back, and Hank felt sickened. The first death. How many more would there be?

He leapt up onto a bench, and shouted to Campbell and the others to take shelter. He waved his arms, and yelled hoarsely: "There's no need for this violence! Do you hear me?"

Wolverine flew at another agent, kicking him in the head as he fired his gun. His shot went wild, and the Beast found himself dancing out of the way of his bullets, one of which ricocheted off a computer bank. Hank stifled a wail of dismay, as something fizzled and burned behind a control panel.

More people were pouring into the room: more Hellfire Club agents, more X-Men. Cyclops and Phoenix came last; Scott must have been injured, as he was leaning heavily against his wife's shoulder—but he still lashed out gamely with his optic blasts. If Hank had ever imagined he could calm things down, then he knew better now. But he still had to try.

Iceman was thrown back against the bench on which he stood. Hank hopped down to the floor beside him, thinking that maybe he could get through to his friends one by one. "Bobby, we've got to bring a halt to this. Neither side can win, but we might all lose far more than you can know."

His teammate threw him an uncertain look, but was distracted as a costumed mercenary came at him, using his empty machine-gun as a bludgeon. Iceman dodged, but took a crack to his shoulder. He retaliated with a barrage of ice darts. "I'll do what I can, Hank," he promised, "but I think

it's these guys you need to be talking to." And, with that, he hurled himself back into the fray.

Hank looked around desperately, and saw Moira MacTaggart arriving with Rogue. She might not have had the X-Men's powers, nor the weapons of their adversaries, but she threw herself into the battle all the same, fighting hand-to-hand and managing to hold her own. Hank bounded towards her, handing off three Hellfire Club goons, and he pulled her to one side, to a position of relative safety.

"Moira, you have to assist me. It's imperative that we do not damage the equipment in this room."

"Hank, we've already talked about this."

He seized her by the shoulders, and stared urgently into her eyes. "You don't understand." The words came out as an anguished cry. "We've done it, Moira. We've found our cure—but this skirmish is jeopardizing our hopes of ever being able to employ it."

Moira opened her mouth, but no words came out. She looked uncertain.

Hank pressed his advantage. "It doesn't have to fall to the Hellfire Club to control it. The X-Men have the upper hand now. Assuming that Shaw is as keen to preserve this discovery as I am, then surely we can reach an accommodation." He was aware of his own voice racing, its pitch becoming higher. "But only if we can stop this now!" And only, he thought, if Shaw hadn't already taken drastic measures. Too many ifs.

Moira's doubts were plain in her expression, but Hank could see that he had almost convinced her—to discuss the matter, at least. By now, though, the laboratory was in chaos, its floor almost invisible beneath a mass of undulating bodies. Even Campbell and the others had been dragged into the melee; Storm had taken it upon herself to protect them. Instinct told Hank to duck, just in time to avoid a spray of bullets. He heard a fragile piece of equipment breaking, and realized that the support of one

friend wasn't nearly enough. She was as helpless to stop this as he was.

That was when his gaze alighted upon somebody else: a new arrival, who had reached the doorway and halted there. It was Sebastian Shaw. And for once, he wasn't smiling. He surveyed the chaos, lips set into a grim line. Then his eyes met Hank's, and a flash of understanding passed between the two men.

Moira saw it too. "Hank, you can't!" she whispered, but he was already making his way across the packed room. Shaw came to meet him, finding a path more easily. Whereas the Beast had to keep on his toes, ducking and dodging, twisting this way and that, forever alert for any attempt to attack him, Shaw strode almost casually, never losing sight of his target, and the crowd just seemed to part around him.

"We've got to stop this," said Hank, as they met, and the Black King just nodded.

Then his eyes widened and became bloodshot, and, as much as he tried to control it, Hank could see that he was in agony.

A second later, he saw the reason.

"Jeannie, no!" Phoenix had appeared behind Shaw, her eyes a dangerous red. Her foe's energy-absorbing powers couldn't defend him against a mental attack. As his eyeballs started to roll back into his head, Hank leapt at his friend, took hold of her and shook her, breaking her concentration. Shaw, still staggered, breathed heavily and put a hand to his forehead. Phoenix looked at the Beast, quizzically.

"There's no time to explain," Hank panted. "You've got to trust me on this one, Jean. Can you do that?"

"You don't have to ask," she said, but she was still confused.

"I've negotiated a truce." Despite her promise, it looked like Phoenix was about to say something. Hank forestalled the objection. "It's entirely in our interests, believe me. It is

vital that we bring this unfortunate contretemps to as swift a conclusion as possible!”

“I can order my men to lay down their weapons,” offered Shaw. He was still pale, but otherwise he seemed to have recovered from Phoenix’s assault with incredible speed. “Under the circumstances, though, I’d have difficulty making myself heard.”

Phoenix nodded. “OK.”

She lowered her head and concentrated, and suddenly an impression formed in Hank’s mind. He thought—no, *knew*—that Shaw was reaching out to him personally, making it clear that he didn’t want this fight to continue. Jean must have reached into the Black King’s thoughts, found that strong, genuine desire and communicated it to everybody, along with her own endorsement for the sake of the X-Men.

The tactic proved effective. Silence descended upon the laboratory, and everybody looked towards Shaw and Phoenix to see what they should do next. Rogue froze, with one hand pinning a Hellfire Club agent to the wall, the other drawn back and clenched into a fist. Storm took advantage of the cessation of hostilities to usher a frightened Professor Travers into a slightly safer position, behind her.

“This isn’t a trick,” said Shaw, his voice calm and measured now, but carrying easily across the hushed room to his attentive servants. “The X-Men and I have reached an ... agreement. As of now, they are to be considered my guests. Return to your normal duties.” As the uniformed agents began to file, obediently and unquestioningly, out into the corridor, he glanced down at the floor, which was strewn with the unconscious bodies of the fallen. “Those of you who can,” he added wryly. He still wasn’t smiling.

Cyclops found his way to Phoenix’s side, still hobbling slightly. “Jean?”

Phoenix glanced meaningfully towards Hank, and he knew this was the moment of truth. The room was emptying: only a small team of agents had stayed behind to

revive their colleagues, or to carry them out where revival proved impossible. Shaw himself stepped into the shadows, watching quietly as the X-Men gathered expectantly around their blue-furred teammate. The rest of the scientists also drew closer, anxious for news of their fate.

Hank looked around the room, assessing the condition of the

Kree computer banks. They had certainly been battered; one panel had been blown out altogether, and several screens were broken. He prayed that the damage was not too extensive.

He looked at each of the X-Men in turn, then his gaze lingered last and longest upon Moira. She hesitated for a second, before folding her arms tightly across her chest, and giving him a winsome smile and a nod of support. Grateful for that, at least, Hank took a deep breath, trying to drive back the pain in his head for long enough to give what seemed, at that moment, to be the most crucial speech of his life.

And then, the pain attacked him with a vengeance. The world shot out of focus, and Hank doubled up in a coughing fit so violent that he felt as if his heart and lungs were straining to escape from his body. He blacked out for an instant, and, when he came to, he was sitting on a stool, sweat matting his fur, concerned friends hovering around him, and Moira was dabbing at his forehead with a cold, wet cloth.

"Och, Hank," she groaned, "you didn't, did you? Please tell me you didn't."

Hank wanted to answer her, but his throat was too dry, and he couldn't speak.

"Is someone gonna tell us what's going on?" asked Wolverine, impatiently.

"He's infected himself, that's what," said Moira, with a hint of bitterness.

"Infected himself?" echoed Iceman. "With what?"

But some of the others were quicker on the uptake. “Oh Goddess, no ... ” breathed Storm, putting a hand to her mouth in horror.

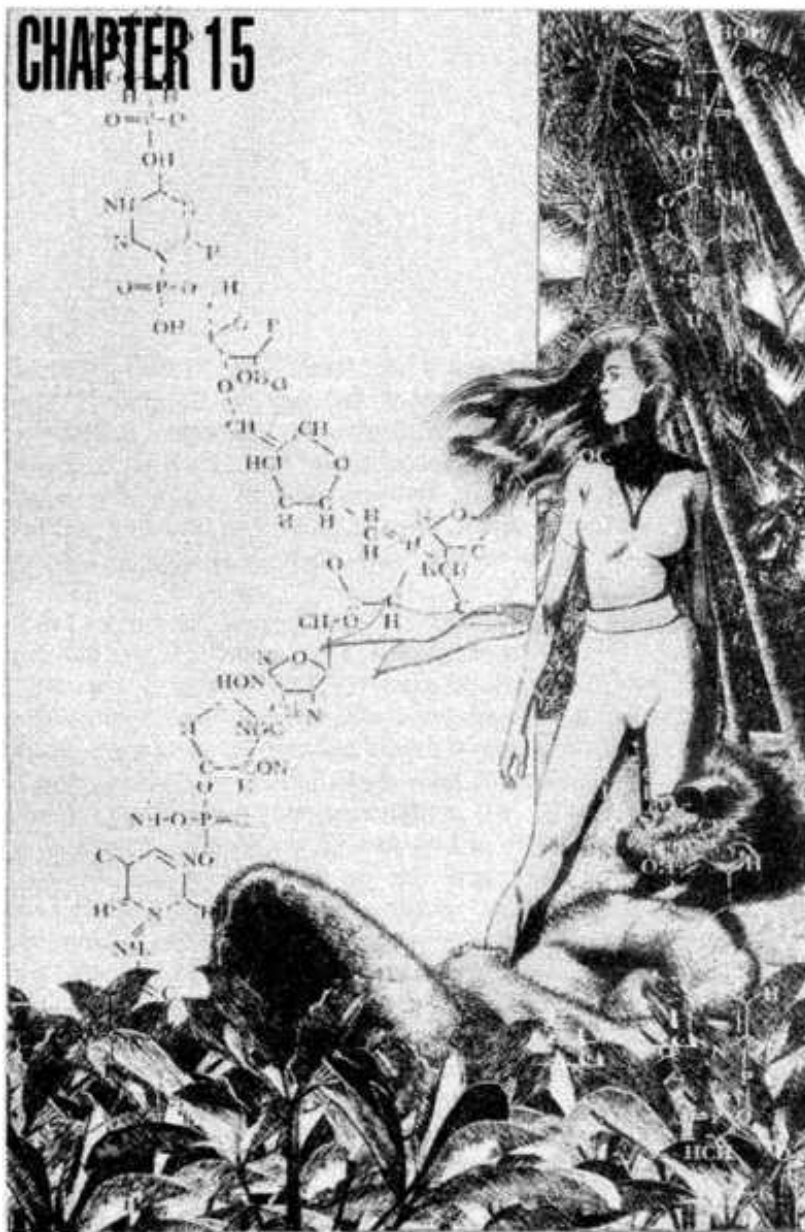
“We needed a test subject,” croaked Hank, each word burning in his throat. “It had to be a healthy mutant. I had no choice. But... Legacy...” He coughed again, and breathed deeply to compose himself before continuing. “Legacy is unpredictable. Some people can live with it for months, others for days or less. I... I find myself in the latter group, I’m afraid.”

“But Moira said you were looking for a cure,” protested Rogue. “She said you were...” She hesitated, but chose to complete the sentence. “She said you were working with Shaw.”

“She was correct,” said Hank. He cast his eyes downwards, sparing himself the sight of his friends’ reactions. He pressed on quickly: “And we can debate the rights and wrongs of my decision at a more opportune time. For now, all that matters is that I have been given a chance to rid the world of the Legacy Virus at last. I can save potentially thousands of lives, including those of several good colleagues here present. You—and I mean all of you He looked pointedly at Shaw. must decide now whether you will allow me to take that chance. You might feel—” He transferred his attention to Moira, “—that you’d rather find the cure some other way. Most of you can afford to wait. If that is your decision, then so be it-but, whatever you decide, you will have to do so quickly.

“Forty minutes ago, I infected myself with the Legacy Virus. Ten minutes after that, I injected the serum that is the first stage of our untested Legacy cure into my system. So far, its effect upon the diseased cells has been negligible.

“Without further treatment, I can measure my life expectancy in hours.”



S WITH much of the recovered Kree facility, the Hellfire Club had done little to brighten up the area that they had designated their conference room. They had restored it to full functionality, but nothing more. Ororo Munroe looked at the dull, gray, windowless walls and the single closed door,

and was reminded that she was still underground. She felt confined, but she refused to be distracted by her illogical fears. Not now. Not while there were still important issues to be resolved.

As the X-Men's deputy leader, Storm was speaking for the team at this hastily convened meeting. She was backed up by Phoenix, who sat beside her at the circular conference table. Shortly after hostilities had ceased in the laboratory, Cyclops had collapsed, succumbing at last to a telepathically-delayed reaction to the power drain inflicted upon him by Fitzroy. He was sleeping now, with his teammates watching over him, in a neighboring bunkroom.

A

The Beast had wanted to be here as well, but Moira had forbidden it. His condition was too fragile. He too was resting, and she had promised to put his point of view across to this gathering, as well as her own. She was seated to Ororo's right, with Doctor Rory Campbell next to her. Moira had been civil enough to her former assistant, but Storm could tell from her body language that he made her uncomfortable. She didn't trust his motives.

Ororo had seen nothing of either Madelyne or Fitzroy. Presumably, the Black and White Rooks had made themselves scarce after their recent defeats. The Inner Circle was represented by its Black King, Shaw. He sat next to Campbell, directly across the table from his opposite number, whom he regarded coolly. He had regained his usual self-assured demeanor. Ororo would hardly have guessed from looking at him that the X-Men had just ruined his plans. To Shaw's right, between him and Jean, was his seemingly ever-present assistant, Tessa.

Moira opened the meeting by recounting what she knew of the Hellfire Club's actions so far, for the benefit of Ororo and Jean. Her voice carried an accusatory tone, especially as she described her own kidnapping and Shaw's inhuman treatment of his team of geneticists. But Shaw himself said nothing to dispute her version of events. He simply nodded quietly at appropriate junctures, and the ghost of a smile played about his lips. Ororo was saddened. Life seemed to mean so little to him. No more than just another commodity, to be used and abused. She had met too many people with similar attitudes, though, to be particularly surprised or angered. In contrast, Moira looked like she could flare up at any minute, incensed by Shaw's smugness. To Ororo's relief, she contained herself.

What did surprise her was the revelation of how Hank McCoy, far from being snatched by the Hellfire Club as the X-Men had assumed, had offered his services to them willingly. However, by the time Moira had explained his reasons, calmly and without any personal bias, Ororo thought she understood.

"We knew he had been affected by recent events," she reflected. "If only we had realized quite how badly."

"May I suggest," said Shaw, "that such recriminations are of no use to us now."

"Fine," said Moira, with heavy sarcasm. "So, we'll not talk about the innocent people you've kidnapped and infected then, shall we not?" ' '

"The important thing, my dear," said Shaw, and Ororo saw a scowl flicker across Moira's face at the familiar term of address, "is to deal with the situation as it currently stands-and, specifically, with the fact that we are on the verge of finding a cure for the Legacy Virus."

"How close are you, exactly?" asked Jean.

Shaw turned to Campbell. "Theoretically," said the scientist, "we're already there. According to the projections we ran on the Kree computer, our treatment should work."

"In practice, though," Moira pointed out, "there's some way to go yet."

"The serum that Doctor McCoy has taken should react with his mutant gene."

"It should. But so far, it hasn't."

"However," countered Campbell, "this wasn't an unexpected development. We've already prepared a course of safe radiation treatment, using Kree machinery. It should be possible to jumpstart the reaction."

"And how long might that take?" asked Ororo.

"We should see some positive effect within an hour or so of the first dose. After that, it's difficult to say. Days, perhaps weeks, before Hank goes into remission. As soon as he does, though, we'll have a new, improved serum, which we can extract from his bloodstream." Ororo glanced questioningly at Moira. The Scots woman shrugged. "Hank described the process to me. I can't say for sure that it'll work, but-well, it's feasible. I only wish he'd carried out proper tests before throwing himself in at the deep end like this." She shot a filthy look at Shaw. "No prizes for guessing who takes the blame for that." ' '

"We don't appear to have much choice," said Ororo, with a sigh. "As Henry himself said, he doesn't have much time. If we

wish to save his life, then we must allow this project to continue.” She noticed Shaw’s satisfied expression, and added sharply: “However, there will be certain conditions.”

“For a start,” said Moira, “I’ll have nothing to do with this cure of yours without a guarantee that it will be freely available to anyone who wants it.”

“I might remind you,” said Shaw, “that the Hellfire Club, not to mention my own company, Shaw Industries, have invested a considerable amount of capital in this venture.”

“Aye, and you’ve broken a considerable number of laws as well!” “I think that’s a matter for the courts to decide, don’t you?”

“Oh, I get it!” snapped Moira. “I suppose, once you were finished with your unwilling slaves, you were planning to get one of your tame telepaths to mess with their memories, were you? Make sure they didn’t testify?” She glared at Tessa, who had contributed nothing to the discussion so far. She seemed happy to sit at her employer’s side, observing. “Well, you can forget that too, Shaw. You’ve done enough to those people already!”

The Black King shrugged, appearing unconcerned. Ororo wondered if it was a bluff, but it was certainly possible that he had the right contacts to ensure that any charges laid against him were thrown out, or at least dealt with in a way that didn’t inconvenience him too much. Perhaps his company would receive a token fine. It annoyed her to think that, legally as well as physically, Shaw himself might be virtually untouchable.

“Nevertheless,” he said, “I do expect some return from my outlay.” He smiled tightly. “Otherwise, what possible motive do I have for allowing McCoy and his colleagues to continue their work at all? Need I remind you that this island, like everything upon and beneath it, is the property of the Hellfire Club? The X-Men are trespassers here.” “Trespassers who could bring this whole place down on top of you,” grumbled Moira.

“Then do so,” challenged Shaw.

“All right,” said Ororo, “suppose we were to agree that if this cure does prove viable, then you can market it at a reasonable cost.” She stressed the word ‘reasonable’.

"That's all I ask."

"But we take a sample away with us too," said Moira, "just in case."

"I think that's fair," said Jean. She smiled at Shaw, sweetly. "We wouldn't want you to be tempted to go back on your word, now would we?"

"Acceptable," said Shaw, with a brusque nod.

"You will also allow Professor Travers, and Doctors Scott and Takamoto, to leave with us now if they wish," said Ororo, "or to contact their families, if they'd prefer to stay."

Shaw shrugged nonchalantly, as if it were of no importance to him.

"And the X-Men will maintain a presence at this facility, until the cure is ready."

"Ms. Munroe, you will already have the Beast on site-and Doctor MacTaggart as well, if she is prepared to swallow her precious principles and help us now." Shaw looked at Moira. "I'm sure that, even at this late stage, her expertise would prove invaluable."

"Henry McCoy is very ill," said Ororo, "and I intend to ensure that he's looked after. Three more X-Men will remain on this island at all times."

"Two," said Shaw.

"Only if you withdraw any personnel who aren't required to keep the base running."

"Agreed."

"And that includes the Lords Cardinal."

Shaw thought about it for a few seconds. "Agreed," he said again. "But I will remain here to supervise the proceedings myself-and, of course, I will need Tessa with me."

"Veiy well then," said Ororo. "Goddess help us all, but I think we have an agreement."

"I think we do," said Shaw. He got to his feet, and reached across the table, his smile turning into a broad grin. Ororo stood too, took his hand and shook it.

She tried not to show how much she was revolted by the very touch of his skin.

Wolverine put Storm's misgivings into words, when he heard what had been decided. "Seems to me we're just rolling over and letting Shaw and his flunkies get away with it," he complained from beneath the landing wheels of the crippled Blackbird. He and Rogue had ventured out into the forest, even though the evening had drawn in and a light rain had begun to fall. They were checking up on the plane, seeing what they could do about patching it up, at least enough to get them home.

"I know how you feel," said Ororo, "but there were other people to consider in all this."

"Those poor scientists," said Rogue, sympathetically.

Wolverine showed his oil-streaked face, which wore a disgruntled scowl. "Yeah, and I'd happily pop a claw or two through Shaw's heart just for what he's done to them, let alone to McCoy and Moira. Doesn't seem right that he's gonna profit from it."

"But we've put a dent in his plans," Rogue pointed out. "What else can we do? We can't very well leave Hank and Doctor Scott and the rest to die, can we?"

"Unfortunately," said Storm, "a deal with Shaw seemed the lesser of two evils."

"And at least, this way, we get a cure for the Legacy Virus," said Rogue. "We can save Moira too, and who-knows-how-many other people in the future."

"Let's hope so," said Wolverine. "I'm not complaining, 'Ro. You did the right thing." Darkly, he added: "But Shaw's day will come— and that's a promise!"

Shaw was trailed by Tessa all the way to his temporary office in the underground facility. He had almost forgotten she was there, until they reached the door and she quietly asked him if he required anything more of her. He told her to arrange the partial evacuation of the island, as agreed with Storm, and the reopening of the Hellfire Club's mainland headquarters. Then he turned his back, closed the door on her, and retreated into solitude behind his desk.

Alone now, Shaw dropped his confident, indifferent facade. His face darkened, his fists tightened, and he sat and brooded

for several minutes. The X-Men, it seemed, were always able to thwart his ambitions. He should have seen this coming. Worse, he *had* seen it coming, but he had been too arrogant to do anything about it, to change his plans. He should have left the MacTaggart woman alone. But then if he had, the Beast would never have come to him, and he might not have come so close to finding" his longed-for cure. No, he decided, he hadn't come out of this too badly, all things considered.

He repeated that affirmation to himself until he almost believed it. But still, his dark mood persisted. Shaw knew the reason why, although he had been trying to deny it. It irritated him to think that one person-any one person-should have this sort of power over him. He was angry with himself for feeling nervous; afraid, even. And, worst of all, for feeling inferior.

He bit down hard and tried to override his trepidation. He stabbed out with a determined finger, and booted up his laptop computer. He didn't allow himself to hesitate as he ran the communications program. He seethed with indignation as a pop-up window informed him that his business partner couldn't take his call right now, but would speak with him at his earliest convenience.

Shaw waited, rehearsing arguments in his head, becoming ever more impatient.

When the shadowy figure with the burning eyes appeared at last on his screen, he forgot all his carefully planned words. "I take it you have something to report, Shaw?" came the familiar inhuman strains of a digitally-altered voice.

Shaw took a deep, controlled breath, and resolved not to let himself be treated like a subordinate. He had entered into this business arrangement as an equal—and, even if his so-called ally wouldn't address him as such, then at least he would act the part.

"There's been a change of plan," he said.

"The X-Men," surmised his partner, with an unmistakable hint of contempt.

"Indeed," said Shaw, tightly. He recapped recent events, emphasizing the benefits of McCoy's cooperation. But his partner was not to be mollified.

"I told you what would happen if you involved Xavier's whelps in our plans," he snapped.

"They're prepared to let us finish our work," stated Shaw, flatly.

"Under their supervision! This cure is only half as much use to us if we don't exercise sole control over it. You know that, Shaw!"

The Black King's temperature was rising now, as he turned his fear into resentment, which in turn became anger. Fortunately, he was used to controlling his emotions. But he could see his own eyes flashing dangerously in his reflection in the screen.

"I took the necessary steps to ensure that a cure will exist at all," he said, tartly. "I salvaged success from a project that was going nowhere."

"If you call this 'success,' submitting to the wishes of our greatest enemies. I raised an island for you, Shaw. I helped to fund your miserable operation—only for you to overreach yourself again. Your incompetence has brought down everything we've worked for!"

Shaw's lips curled into a snarl. "This game isn't over yet..." He almost addressed his partner by name over the link, but that would only have riled him even more. "The X-Men might find I've still got a trick or two up my sleeve." *As might you, you imperious blowhard!* he added silently, to himself.

"You'd better, Shaw—for your own sake."

The shadowy face disappeared from Shaw's screen, and another window appeared to tell him that the link had been severed from the other side. He stared at the message in disbelief, and felt a rare, uncontrollable fury rising inside him. He threw himself to his feet, overturning his chair in the process. He swept his arm across the desk, scattering papers and knocking his laptop computer to the floor. He picked up a paperweight and hurled it viciously across the room. Then, running out of targets upon which to vent his wrath, he turned and punched the wall repeatedly. His mutant ability didn't protect him—because he was creating kinetic energy himself, and turning it outwards—and his knuckles became bruised. But

the sharp pain helped him to focus, and his rage eventually subsided.

He was relieved, at least, that nobody had been around to witness his outburst. To other people-most other people-Sebastian Shaw was a cool, collected businessman, a controlled force to be reckoned with. He had no wish to alter that perception.

There were some sides of himself that he preferred to keep hidden.

The rain had passed now, and the sky was clear again. But water seeped into Hank McCoy's trunks and fur as he sat on the damp grass, leaning back against a tree-trunk and staring upwards. He was tired, and he wanted to close his eyes-but the night sky, untainted by the electric lighting of civilization, was a sight well worth a little effort to see.

Hank marveled at the uncountable thousands of stars that freckled the dark void, each one a blazing sun, perhaps supporting life on its orbiting planets. He was luckier than most: he had been out there, several times, and had witnessed wonders far beyond the imagination of most earthbound humans. But, from this perspective, he could see how vast the universe was, and he knew he had glimpsed only the tiniest fraction of what Creation had to offer.

There was still so much to see. So much to do.

Behind him, he heard footsteps, climbing the metal steps from the underground base. He sighed. His moment of quiet solitude had been all too brief.

The intruder walked through the clearing and straight towards him, even though he had thought himself concealed from the entranceway by the tree against which he rested. That told him who she was, even before he scented her gentle perfume on the fresh breeze.

"Hello, Jean," he said, without looking at her.

"I bet Moira wouldn't be too pleased with you if she knew you'd come out here alone," said Jean Grey Summers, but the good-humored tone of her voice belied the admonishing words. "Aren't you meant to be hooked up to all types of monitoring equipment downstairs?"

"I was weary of being poked and prodded and analyzed," said Hank. "This might be my last opportunity to view the night sky, and to breathe in fresh air. I thought I'd take it."

Phoenix sat beside him. "I thought your first dose of radiation treatment went well?"

"As well as could be expected, yes. There have been no unpleasant side-effects, which is something to be grateful for. The idea of a balding, blue Beast hardly bears thinking about."

"But your mutant gene-it is fighting back now, isn't it?"

Hank nodded. "The rate at which the Legacy Virus is corrupting my DNA strands has slowed considerably. However, the long-term prognosis is still somewhat uncertain."

"Well, Moira seems to think you might make a full recovery. So does Doctor Campbell. You ought to have more faith in yourself, Hank. I do." '

"I am simply being pragmatic, Jeannie." With another heavy sigh, Hank wrenched his gaze away from the stars and turned to her. "Nobody can be sure precisely what this treatment will do to me. I have to face the possibility that I might still die." He held up a hand to forestall her next words. "And don't tell me not to think like that, because I'd rather be prepared."

"Fair enough," said Jean quietly. "So, how do you feel right now?" "Exhausted. Fragile. Sick. Dizzy. My immune system is diverting

all the resources it can marshal into an all-out war, win or lose. I feel burnt out, scoured clean inside. My body is failing me, and I feel helpless. I feel like William Montgomery must have felt, except that I'm the lucky one, because I still have some hope of being able to reverse my deterioration."

Jean didn't say anything. Hank closed his eyes. He longed for sleep, but he feared that if he were to doze off now he might never wake again. If this was his last day on Earth, then he wanted it to last a little longer. He wasn't ready to leave yet.

"According to Logan, the Blackbird's almost ready." Jean's attempt to change the subject was transparent. She thought it might help him to have something else to discuss, bless her. "We should be flying back to Westchester tomorrow."

Hank nodded. "Who's staying behind?"

“Ororo and Bobby. And Moira, of course. Scott and I would have stayed, but he’s still so weak. It’ll take him a couple of days to recover from what Fitzroy did to him.”

“How *is* Scott?”

“Sleeping like a lamb. Don’t worry about him, he’ll be fine. Well, apart from a few battle scars—but we’ve all got them, I think.”

“We certainly have,” said Hank, morosely. He opened his eyes and looked up at the stars again. “How did we get here, Jeannie? It seems like only yesterday that we were enrolling at Professor Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters, the eager new students. The world seemed a much simpler place, then.”

“I know,” sighed Jean.

“It’s early afternoon on the East Coast of America. Sunday afternoon. Just over three days since I attended the funeral in Newhill. It’s one of the quirks of memory, I suppose, that whereas our halcyon school days feel so recent, it seems like a lifetime since I heard that William Montgomery had died.”

“But you’ve achieved so much since then!” insisted Jean.

“I just hope it’s enough.”

“You’re prepared to sacrifice your life to cure the Legacy Virus! How can anybody expect any more of you than that?”

Hank shook his head. “No, Jean. I wish that was the case, but it’s not. I’d die happily if I thought I could save others by so doing. But if I die now, it will be because the project has failed, because a cure is still beyond us after all. I will have achieved nothing.”

“That’s not true!”

“Which makes me wonder,” he continued, ignoring the interruption, “have I been misguided all along? By throwing in my lot with the Hellfire Club and then infecting myself as I have, have I acted in a rational manner? Or have I allowed my impatience and feelings of guilt to override my better judgement? Have I thrown away my life, and my chances of discovering a real cure for Legacy, on a foolish whim? Have I, in effect, committed suicide?”

“You did what you thought to be the right thing,” said Jean, “in a difficult situation. Nobody will judge you for that.”

Selene sat back comfortably in her cushioned throne, as the image of Phoenix's concerned face faded into the milky white depths of her hovering crystal ball. Her conversation with the Beast had been recorded, some hours earlier, while Selene had slumbered through the daylight hours. Now, with a flick of her hand, she returned the scrying device to its dais and thought about what she had learned.

It had always been difficult to spy on Sebastian Shaw; he knew what precautions to take to foil her efforts. However, he had not yet learned that, for the Black Queen, nothing was impossible. As soon as she had met Doctor Henry McCoy, she had known he was searching for information that she too might appreciate. And she had known he would find it. It had been a simple matter for Selene to combine her dark arts and her mutant powers of the mind, and to cast a spell upon him surreptitiously.

She could see through the Beast's eyes now-and, from his unique point of view, she had witnessed much that had interested her.

"So, my 'dear friend'," she muttered to herself, "my Black King, Sebastian. You thought you could keep this project from me, did you? You couldn't bring yourself to trust me. Well, perhaps you had good cause..."

Selene had never worried overmuch about the Legacy Virus. She had thought of it as something she would deal with, in time, if she had to. But the possibilities of a cure ... and of being the only person to possess that cure....

She smiled, as ideas began to form in her mind. But there was no sense, she knew, in acting hastily. She would monitor the situation on Shaw's Pacific island, bide her time, and strike only when the opportune moment presented itself.

In the meantime, she had plenty to occupy her thoughts. The sounds of torment from the catacombs below had been mystically amplified to echo through her sanctum. They called to her, and she answered them, drifting serenely out into the corridor and down into the depths.

The night was still young, after all.

X-MEN®
THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY:
BOOK 2



UTANTS.

The African-American woman could sense them. They were all around her. She saw their shapes behind her eyelids, could almost taste the foul creatures on the back of her tongue. She knew that, despite appearances, she was not alone on this darkened street. She knew where they lurked. They thought themselves unseen behind their comers and their grime-

streaked windows, but she knew they were watching her. She knew that they had surrounded her.

She knew they were closing in.

Pearl Scott's heartbeat quickened. She tried to conceal herself in the shadows of the sidewalk, but she felt their evil eyes upon her like laser beams. They were on the rooftops too, high above her, almost touching the roiling white sky that cast this nightmare place into the perpetual, uncaring gloom of twilight. Like vultures, they were ready to swoop.

"No," she moaned to herself. "No, no, no ..."

She had always known that this day would come. Each time she had been forced to venture outdoors, to look for food or to collect the precious serum that prolonged her life, she had been aware of the street gangs and the lone lunatics around her. Their footsteps echoed in her ears as their sadistic intentions echoed inside her mind. She had learned to rely upon her instincts, to let them guide her through the empty streets and alleyways. Deep down, she was aware that those instincts made her a mutant too, but she refused to accept that truth. She didn't—she *couldn't have* anything in common with the misfits, the freaks, the cold-blooded killers who preyed upon the carcass of this once-proud city.

She dropped the three dented cans with their peeling labels—all the food she had been able to scavenge on this foray—and broke into a run. But Pearl Scott had never been an athletic woman even at the best of times. She was approaching middle age, weakened by starvation rations, and the virus was eating away at her insides.

And there was nowhere to run to anyway.

Once, maybe, not so long ago, she could have found shelter among the crowds in Grand Central Station, only a few blocks away. But there were no crowds now. This place, once her favorite in the world, had become a ghost town, a hollowed-out shell of its former self. There were no trains left to whisk her away from the madness, no way to return to her comfortable, suburban home upstate and her doting husband.

Her husband was dead. And she hadn't seen her beautiful home in almost three months.

Not since the mutants had taken over New York City. Selene could taste their fear. She feasted on their desperation.

Her body rested against velvet cushions on an ornate throne, the literal seat of her power. Her eyes were closed and her hands formed a spire in front of her nose and mouth. Her long, white fingers protruded from black leather gloves, and their perfectly manicured red nails rested against each other. But her mind was tethered to her body only by a slender thread.

Selene's astral self flew unseen beyond the Fifth Avenue mansion house headquarters of the New York branch of the Hellfire Club. It swooped between the skyscrapers and soared along the streets of her domain. It drank in the hopelessness, the all-pervading despair, exulting in the odd sweet moment of terror and the beautiful release of death that so often followed it.

The body shifted on its comfortable throne in response to the ecstasy felt by the mind. Tight muscles beneath Selene's pale skin drew her red lips back into a thin smile.

But today of all days, she couldn't fully lose herself in pleasure. She couldn't quell the tingles of anticipation that ran through her. Nor could she ignore the deeper, more unsettling feeling of anxiety, much as she tried to deny it. And so her green eyes flicked open, and her senses began to readjust themselves to familiar surroundings.

The Black Queen's throne room had grown in accordance with her stature. The tiny office on this first basement level had never been opulent-nor indeed decadent-enough for her tastes, but it had been close to the nightmare chambers and the catacombs beneath them. In the ground floor ballroom, Selene had been the perfect host to the elite of society, charming and vivacious. Down here, hidden from the sight of all but the chosen, she had always been able to

reveal her true self. But the office-if it could still be called such-had grown impossibly beyond the bounds of its external dimensions. Now, slight air currents played with the candle flames as they carried the scent of brimstone up from below, and invisible creatures scratched in the shadows beneath the dusty tapestries and the crumbling cornices.

Slowly, Selene's eyes brought a figure into focus. Her current Black King stood patiently in the entranceway beneath the great stone arch, at the top of which was inscribed the Hellfire Club's upturned trident symbol. Clearly, he hadn't wanted to disturb her trance.

Blackheart had confined himself to his humanoid shape and size, squeezing his corporeal form into a neat black suit. But his charcoal eyes still glowed red in the pits of his stony face, their hue matched by his red shirt and by the folded handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket. His petrified hair, too, detracted from the image of the dapper businessman: it was swept up away from his goblin's ears, but it grew in wild spines down his back.

"Today is the day, my Queen," he said in a voice like grinding rocks.

"I am aware of that," she told him, a little more shortly than she had intended.

"When will they arrive?" Blackheart was unfazed by her rudeness, as content as always to defer to her. The fact that Selene had such a notable demon-the exiled son of Mephisto himself-in her service never ceased to excite her. Nevertheless, she was under no illusion as to the true power of this creature. He remained with her by choice-which was, in itself, a matter of pride to her. They were kindred spirits, both interested in the corruption of innocents and the torture of the human soul. Blackheart was also confined to the underground levels of the Hellfire Club building as a result of a spell cast by a rival: the half-demon, half-human

Daimon Hellstrom. It suited him to play the role of Selene's Black King, for now.

She forced herself to calm down, to ignore the anxiety that spoke in its tremulous, taunting voice into the back of her mind. She nodded past Blackheart. "They will come through that door in precisely three hours, thirty-two minutes and seventeen seconds."

"Should I summon the rest of our Inner Circle?"

"No, Blackheart. That will not be necessary."

"They will fight."

"I welcome their attempts to resist me. They have already been defeated. My sole regret this past year has been that they do not yet know it."

"They will learn," rumbled Blackheart.

"Indeed they will." Selene's voice had become lower now: she was talking more for her own benefit than for that of her partner. "And once we have dealt with them, our hold on this once-human city will be undisputed. Nobody will remain to defy my Hellfire Club. We can begin to extend our power base. We can set our sights upon the next prize..."

The apartment block had already been looted. It was just as well: Pearl Scott had neither the time nor the strength to shoulder her way through locked doors. There were tears in her eyes, and she could hardly see as she ran up a stone staircase that smelled of neglect. Each step felt like a sheer cliff face, and her heart was pounding fit to burst out of her chest.

Her special senses probed ahead of her, telling her that there was a lone squatter in one of the rooms above. A predator, perhaps, lying in wait for the lost and the doomed. Or, like her, a lonely, frightened outcast, cowering from a fate that couldn't be avoided forever.

She willed her feet to fall more softly as she passed the floor on which the mutant had concealed itself, but she didn't dare slow down. She tried to hold her breath, but her

lungs wheezed like bellows, taking in short, panicky gasps of air.

To her relief, the mutant squatter didn't stir. She continued her flight upward.

Her mind screamed a warning to her as the hunters from the street arrived in the lobby below. She had prayed that, unlikely as it had seemed, they wouldn't have seen which building she had ducked into. Or that they would have considered it not worth the effort to pursue her. They could have forgotten her altogether, fighting over the dropped cans, comrade turning against comrade as they so often did.

Those forlorn hopes were dashed now, leaving only one: the hope that, if she found cover in one of the apartments, then they might not find her. They might be too impatient for fresh blood to even waste time searching. They might—and God forgive her for thinking it, but—they might even find the squatter downstairs and be satisfied with taking a single life.

She left the stairwell on the fourth floor, resisting the urge to take the first door on the landing because it was too obvious. She took the second, which hung limply from its hinges, its wooden panels scarred by mutant claws.

The apartment had been trashed. The cupboards in the kitchen area hung open, and one had been wrenched from the wall. They were empty, of course. But furniture had also been overturned, and the walls spray-painted with misspelled slogans. The animals who had invaded this home had had more than food on their mind: they had delighted in destruction.

Personal papers had been shredded and scattered across the floor. Pearl only hoped that their owners had escaped, that their corpses weren't lying here somewhere. To her relief, she couldn't detect the familiar stink of decomposing flesh.

The bed in the smaller of the two bedrooms was still upright, its sheets in disarray and hanging down to the floor. She hid beneath it, taking little solace from the darkness. She couldn't hear anything over the sound of her own breathing and the rasping echoes in her burning chest. But she was aware of her pursuers drawing closer.

She wished she had never come here, to the city of the mutants. She wished she could have spared herself this hell. But she had been too weak. Too afraid to die, even though she had had no hope of survival.

She remembered that fateful day, when the mutants had come from the sky.

She had feared just such an attack for months, ever since the barrier had appeared around Manhattan Island and the mutants had come to live on her doorstep. Many of her neighbors—those with somewhere to go—had moved out, joining the busloads of refugees who had been forced to abandon New York City itself. Pearl would have left too, but property prices in her area had plummeted and she had felt trapped. Anyway, she had wanted to stay put for her husband's sake. So that he would know where to find her. If he ever came back.

She hadn't seen Clyde for over two months, even before that day. He had phoned her once, to confirm her suspicions that mutants had been responsible for his sudden disappearance. He hadn't said much: just that he was working in a secret location on a cure for a mutant disease known as the Legacy Virus. He had told her that he would be home soon. He had been wrong. Slowly, Pearl had come to accept that he was almost certainly dead.

She had spent an eternity cooped up in her home, watching television coverage of the ongoing attempts to penetrate the barrier and praying that perhaps, somehow, they might find her husband behind it. She had had her hopes raised by reports of new technology, which had proved ineffective. The barrier allowed mutants to come and

go as they pleased, but nobody and nothing else was allowed through.

Pearl had found hope again on the day that the world's most respected super heroes, the Avengers, sent an all-mutant team through the barrier under the command of the Scarlet Witch. It had been a reminder of a fact that she had almost forgotten: that not all mutants were bad; that some were even prepared to fight for the very people who despised them.

The heroes had failed to return, and Pearl had soon stopped hoping.

But humanity is a resilient species, and New Yorkers more than most. It seemed incredible, but things had begun to return to normal, the barrier becoming almost a fact of life. Sure, the streets of Pearl Scott's upstate community were a little emptier than before—but while nobody could forget what was happening eighty miles to their south, there were days when it all seemed a very long way away. In time, she had been able to put her fears, and her grief for her husband, aside. She had emerged into the early days of Summer and settled back into her old routines, although she had jumped whenever a car backfired and experienced a twinge of sadness each time she had had to purchase her lonely meals for one.

She had sensed the flying mutants before they had come into her sight. If only she had known then to trust her intuition, if she had turned and fled, then they might not have caught her. Instead she had tried to deny what, in her heart, she had known. She had told herself that she was being paranoid, that they couldn't be coming for her. Hadn't she suffered enough?

The mutants had descended upon the shopping center, and Pearl Scott had screamed and cried and tried to run like everybody else. To this day, she could not recall the monsters' faces, just their feathers and their claws and the

way they had circled and picked out their targets and dived, and the death rattles of her neighbors.

It had been like a game to them: picking off the few so they could savor the reactions of the many. Raking claws across their victims' guts or lifting their bodies aloft to let them fall and be dashed against the flagstones.

They had targeted her, of course. At the time, it had seemed only natural-inevitable in a sickly sort of a way—like she was somehow destined to be plagued by their kind until she died. With the benefit of hindsight, she knew that one of their number must have had senses like her own. It must have known her for what she was, before she even knew it herself.

She remembered the sensation of the world dropping away beneath her feet as talons dug into her shoulders. She hadn't been able to hear much over the rush of the air, the louder rushing of blood to her ears and the sound of her own frantic sobbing, but she had been dimly aware of the mutants discussing her in hard, cackling voices. They had said that she was like them, but her brain had railed against the truth of that statement and, for a long time thereafter, she had believed that she must have imagined the words in her terror.

They had played with her, tossing her between them for what seemed like an eternity. Her head and her stomach had performed dizzy somersaults, and she had closed her eyes and whimpered and awaited the mercy of death. It had come—or so she had thought then— with a slash to her side, delivered as if by steel, spreading hot and cold pain across her body and stealing the light from behind her eyelids.

She had woken, to her immense surprise, in a hospital bed: the only person, she was later told, to have been picked out that day and lived. She had known then, with a creeping dread, that the mutants had chosen her deliberately, and that they had spared her for a reason.

Three months later, she found out what that reason was.

She had found it harder to recover, this time. She had shut herself inside again, relying on the favors of sympathetic friends and on Internet shopping to keep herself fed, becoming a recluse. Her husband had left her provided for, and there had come a time when she had found it hard to imagine venturing beyond her front door again. More people had moved away, and Pearl had entertained thoughts of doing the same, but never for long. It wasn't the money any more: it was the certain knowledge that she was marked. The doctors had assured her that her wounds had recovered nicely, but she had itched inside. She had felt the mutant poison coursing through her veins and known that, wherever she went, they would find her.

She had known that they would return for her one day.

She had become afraid of the sky, afraid to even look out of her windows because every distant speck, each bird that wheeled above the rooftops, was transformed by her mind into a screeching predator. So, she had stopped looking. She had closed her drapes and lived in half-light. But sometimes she had woken in the night, sweat beading her forehead, for no better reason than that she had felt one of them pass overhead.

These days, she wished she had appreciated the sky more when she had had it. She didn't know how long she had lived beneath the ever-shifting white energies of the barrier—the absence of sunlight meant that time had little meaning in the city—but she had come to long for even a glimpse of the stars.

Now, lying on her back beneath somebody else's bed as the hunters continued their inexorable approach, Pearl Scott wondered if she would ever again see anything beyond the wooden slats and the threadbare mattress a few inches above her.

She remembered the kindly old doctor with his haunted face, falling over his words as he had broken the news to

her. The stomach cramps, the flu-like symptoms and the weakness inside her had finally prompted her to reach for the telephone, to break her self-imposed isolation. She had learned only what she had already suspected.

The doctor had been surprised at how calmly she had taken his diagnosis. He had advised her to seek counseling but she had refused, accepting the inevitable with numb resignation.

Pearl Scott had contracted the Legacy Virus. But she had known exactly what to do about it.

She had learned all she needed to know from the TV. The disease was spreading, slowly but surely—and it didn't only affect mutants now, as it had originally, but humans too. It was fatal. And Pearl Scott knew that, despite the best efforts of the world's foremost geneticists, her husband included, nobody really understood it, let alone could come close to curing it.

And yet a cure did exist, in the hands of one person.

One of the major TV networks had smuggled a camera through the barrier once, hidden in the clothing of a mutant volunteer. Pearl had been given a preview of the world that, somehow she had known even then, would eventually become her own. She had watched in awe and horror as the freaks in their ragged clothing had supplicated themselves to their ruler—and she had seen the gleam in the Black Queen's green eyes as her demons had handed out the elixir that they needed to stave off their symptoms. Not enough to cure them, of course: just enough to prolong their miserable lives for a little longer. Selene kept her subjects on a short leash. In a few days' time, they would need her again.

Still, mutants flocked to Manhattan Island from all over the world. Many refugees arrived from the island nation of Genosha, despite the best efforts of its ruler to keep them from leaving: Genosha was in the throes of the world's worst

Legacy epidemic, and Selene offered the only hope of survival to its population of genetically engineered mutants.

An hour after the doctor had left, Pearl had walked out of her beautiful home for the final time. She had carried a plastic bag full of canned goods, and just enough money to reach the George Washington Bridge, and she had walked to the train station with her shoulders straight, her head up and her eyes fixed directly ahead. She hadn't looked at the sky.

It was easy to get onto Manhattan Island. Easy, that was, for the right sort of person. Far harder to get off it again.

Pearl Scott felt as if Fate had been leading her here for a long time, like she had never had a say in the matter. She was always going to end up dying in this dingy room.

They came for her now, and she didn't know if they had found her with their own mutant senses or because her footsteps, her whimpers, perhaps her heartbeat, had been too loud. One of them tore away her shelter, his abnormal muscles rippling as he flung the bed aside with ease. Two more took Pearl by the arms and hauled her to her feet. She saw their feathers and their talons, heard their cruel, spiteful laughter, and wondered if they were the very creatures that had attacked her in the shopping center. Not that it mattered.

Her tears had dried. She was surprised to find that she wasn't even frightened any more. She accepted her death, as she had accepted so much in her life, with quiet resignation. She let the mutants play with her, tossing her between them, digging claws and teeth into her skin, and she knew that this had been their plan all along. This was why they had taken the risk of flying through the barrier, of attacking her community in the first place. This was why they had infected her: to bring her here, to their world, so that they could enjoy this moment.

They didn't even care that she had nothing to give them, because she had given them what they wanted already.

In the Black Queen's city, the mutants didn't only hunt for food and shelter.

They also hunted for sport.

An electric hush seemed to settle upon the world as the appointed time approached.

Selene sat upon her throne and smiled quietly to herself, her icy confidence fed by the charged atmosphere. Her Black King stood at her right hand, and attendant demons lined up behind the royal couple in their incongruous blue and red Hellfire Club uniforms. It had been a long time since they had worn formal dress, but the Black Queen had commanded it of them today. Many of the costumes ill-fitted the grotesque shapes of their wearers, and several were bloodied and torn and only hung together by threads. But on such a momentous occasion, decorum had to be observed.

She didn't need a timepiece to tell her when the moment was near. She sensed the ripples in the magical field, the delicious buildup of energy and a thrill that was almost sexual. She rose from her golden seat, her black cloak tickling the floor. She took one step forward and waited, the smile still poised upon her red lips.

Framed by the grand archway was the wood-paneled door, small and unassuming: the one part of the room that had not been enlarged and improved upon in the past year.

A demon began to snicker, breaking off as it realized how obtrusive the harsh, whispering sound of its laughter was in the silence. Selene would have it flogged later. Or rather, she would have a demon flogged: she had no idea which one was which.

For now, she was counting down the final seconds in her mind. Three ... two ... one ...

The door was flung open.

A gust of stale wind blew through her long, silken hair, and a burst of black light turned the world momentarily inside-out. And suddenly, where there had been nobody before, there appeared eight figures in colorful costumes.

They hurtled across the threshold of the throne room as if ready for combat, although the state of their clothing, the bruises upon their exposed skin and the tiredness that they couldn't conceal in their postures betrayed the fact that they had fought long and hard already.

They took in their new surroundings and faltered.

Selene's smile broadened. They had not expected to find themselves here. They had not expected to find their foe so prepared for them, backed up by the very demons that they had thought defeated. They had already been battle-weary; now they were confused and disoriented as well. The sight of Blackheart must have been especially dispiriting for them.

One of the new arrivals—a short, feral creature clad in yellow and blue—made to press the attack anyway. The man whom Selene knew to be the leader of the group held him back with a gesture, his expression advising caution even as his eyes flashed fire behind the red crystal lens of his golden visor.

They knew that something had gone wrong, but they didn't know what yet.

Selene knew them, of course. They were old acquaintances. Cyclops, Wolverine, Phoenix, Storm, Nightcrawler, Iceman and Rogue: collectively, one permutation of the outlaw team known as the X-Men. They were mutants. Unlike her, they dreamt of a world in which humans and mutants could live together in peace, and they were prepared to fight unselfishly for that dream. To this end, they had clashed with Selene—and set back her plans—on more than one occasion.

But standing with the self-professed heroes was a more interesting individual by far: a member of the Hellfire Club himself, no less. Perhaps its most infamous member.

She almost didn't recognize the middle-aged man at first. She was used to seeing him in the deceptive guise of a Victorian gentleman: the traditional “uniform” of the club's

Inner Circle, a symbol of allegiance to times past. Indeed, he still wore his black hair in an old-fashioned style, pulled back into a ponytail and secured by an elaborate red bow, his sideburns allowed to grow thick. Right now, however, he was dressed for combat: his dark green, padded, one-piece boiler suit remained in pristine condition despite all he must have been through to get here.

He had already recovered from his surprise. He was alert, prepared for whatever might come next. His shrewd eyes probed hers, and Selene could almost see his calculating mind working on a way to turn this situation to his advantage. She half expected him to offer her an alliance. She would have relished the opportunity to laugh in his face.

The gentleman's name was Sebastian Shaw—and once, long ago, he had supported Selene's bid for Hellfire Club membership. He had been her first Black King.

But like the others, he had been gone for a long time—and a lot of things had changed.

"Good afternoon," said the Black Queen, unable to prevent her smile from widening. "As you can see, I have been expecting you."



One year earlier:

SELENE'S DREAMS of power were still just that: dreams. But she never doubted that, one day, those dreams would be realized. She __ had possessed great power in the past-

many centuries ago-and she would do so again. Its acquisition was a game to her, and she played it well, prepared to sacrifice short-term advantage for the sake of ultimate gain.

The game had become more difficult as humanity, despite its shortcomings, had advanced and evolved. It often seemed to her that there were too many players now, too many forces lined up to oppose her, to seek power for themselves. Even so, she had maneuvered herself into a good, strong position. She had control over the New York branch of the Hellfire Club, which meant that she also controlled its affluent members.

She recalled how the Hellfire Club had been formed in London in the eighteenth century, just another exclusive gentlemen's organization. She had paid it little heed at the time, but it had grown in both size and influence until it had become worthy of her attention. Nowadays, it had branches all over the world. It catered to society's rich elite, and it was a powerful mechanism by which they maintained their financial and political positions.

If the Hellfire Club was comprised of the elite, however, then the members of each branch's Inner Circle-the Lords Cardinal, who awarded themselves ranks based on the names of chess pieces and operated from the shadows-were the elite of the elite. Selene had wheedled herself into the Inner Circles of first New York and then

Hong Kong, albeit both times playing a subordinate role to Sebastian Shaw as the Black King. Recently, however, she had seen an opportunity to take the New York branch-considered by most to be the brightest jewel in the Hellfire Club's crown-for herself. Now and forever, she was the Black Queen.

And she had pawns that weren't even aware of the power she had over them.

The Black Queen sat upon her throne in a small room beneath the Hellfire Club's Fifth Avenue headquarters. She

had made a start on decorating what had once been a dull office to her tastes—an exquisite mixture of the grand and the sinister, with carved demon faces leering out from behind velvet drapes and black candle wax melting onto gold holders—but it was not yet regal enough for her. She would rectify that soon. For now, however, her attention was taken by events occurring eight thousand miles away.

Eight days ago, Selene had had an encounter with the X-Man known as the Beast. He had been on a personal journey, and she had sensed that his eventual findings were likely to be of interest to her. She had wanted to see his journey through to its conclusion.

Selene's crystal ball was glowing white, and she summoned it to her with a thought. It rose from its marble dais and hovered in front of her. The mists beneath its surface were clearing, and a face came into focus. It was a young face, topped by mousy brown hair, and it wore an expression of concern.

Selene leaned forward expectantly, her chin resting on her bony fist, and watched.

"Hank! Hank!"

Somebody was shaking him. He didn't want to wake, but he had no choice. He rose to the surface of sleep, feeling as if he were swimming up through a tar pit.

Hovering above him was the youthful face of one of his oldest friends. His name was Bobby Drake-but, thanks to the incredible powers with which he had been invested by an accident of his birth, he also went by the *nom de guerre* of Iceman.

"Come on pal, time to get up. It's time for your treatment." Bobby tried to smile, but the gesture seemed forced. His eyes betrayed the fact that something was worrying him.

Hank wondered what it could be. He wondered why he had woken in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room with dull metal walls, and he wondered why he felt so weak and

sick, why his body was running hot and cold and why his blue fur was matted with sweat. He tried to stand, but the movement made him feel dizzy. Bobby took him by his arm and gently helped him into a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

Hank sat with his fragile head in his hands, staring down at his clawed feet on the gray floor as the final veil of his deep sleep lifted and his recent memories settled back into place.

His name was Doctor Henry McCoy, but to the world at large he was the Beast. And like his friend Bobby, he was hated and feared by that world. Like Bobby, he had been born with a certain anomaly in his genes; an anomaly which made him a mutant, part of the next evolution of humanity. Where Bobby had the power to create and shape ice, Hank had been gifted with supernormal strength and athletic prowess.

He had also sprouted blue fur, claws, pointed ears and fangs.

He recognized his surroundings now, and an old weight settled back upon his shoulders. He was a long way from his New York home. He had gone to sleep-passed out, more like-in a tiny dormitory in a research facility located beneath an island in the Pacific Ocean.

The island was artificial, built thousands of years ago by an alien race of master geneticists known as the Kree—and they had left some of their secrets behind. Hank had come to their abandoned base in search of those secrets. He had seen a chance to realize his most fervent desire: to find a cure for the Legacy Virus, the disease that was ravaging the world's mutant population. A week ago, he had achieved that goal at long last-or so he had believed.

Along with a group of fellow scientists, he had developed a serum. In order to test it, however, he had needed to find a newly-infected mutant. Events had conspired to make the search urgent-and in an act of desperation, Hank had

volunteered himself as a test subject. He had infected himself with Legacy, and then literally taken his own medicine.

But the injection of the serum was only the first stage in a long, frustrating process-and now Hank was a lot less confident that his untested cure would work at all.

His nausea had receded-at least as much as it ever did, now that he was dying. He put an arm around Bobby's shoulders and allowed himself to be lifted to his feet. He had been given the nearest room to the laboratory-a storeroom, which had been cleared out for his use and furnished with a bed and a single chair from the residential level below-but the connecting corridor still felt like it was a mile long.

He tackled the arduous trek the only way he could: with one faltering step at a time, leaning heavily on Bobby for support.

"Easy now. That's right, just take it steady. There's no hurry. Doctor MacTaggart can wait. She's only got one patient." Bobby kept up his pointless commentary, talking for the sake of talking even when he didn't know what to say. No doubt he thought he was keeping Hank's spirits up. Grateful as he was for the intention, Hank would rather have been left in silence. His eyelids were heavy, and he couldn't believe that another six hours had passed already. He had slept through most of it, which was probably a blessing.

"It'll be better news today," said Bobby, "you'll see. The treatments have got to start working soon. It stands to reason, doesn't it? You checked all the figures a hundred times, and you're the smartest guy I know. You'll be up and about before you know it."

Try as he might, Hank couldn't be so optimistic. Whenever he tried to look ahead, all he could see was a big, black cloud hanging over his future.

"This time next week, we'll be back home, you'll see. In fact... say, Hank, did you ever wonder what happened to Vera and Zelda? Maybe we could look them up when we get

out of here, take them out on a double date... to celebrate, you know? It'll be like old times."

Doctor Moira MacTaggert was waiting for them in the laboratory as usual. There were four other scientists-Hank himself excluded-working in this facility at present. However, he had seen little of Scott, Alahan, Travers or even Rory Campbell in recent days. Moira was an old friend and colleague, and she had taken it upon herself to supervise every stage of his treatment herself. Despite this, she had never been one to let overt displays of emotions get in the way of her work, and her manner was businesslike to the point of brusqueness. The sleeves of her white lab coat were rolled up to the elbows, and Hank couldn't help but notice the dark rings around her eyes. He wondered when she had last slept.

"And how is the patient today?" asked Moira in her rich Scottish accent as she helped Bobby to lay Hank down on his back on a hard metal bench. The Kree had designed this base with efficiency rather than comfort in mind.

He described his symptoms in clinical detail in a painful, rasping voice as Moira drew blood from his arm into a syringe. He had had so many needles inside him recently that he was surprised she could even find a spot on his skin that hadn't already been punctured.

Set into the walls of the laboratory were an assortment of keyboards, screens and dials: user interfaces for the Kree computer which ran this base, and from the memory banks of which Hank and his fellow scientists had sifted the information that had allowed them to come this far. Moira placed a vial of his blood into a small compartment in one wall, and allowed the computer to analyze its composition. It was a familiar process by now.

A screen above Hank's head lit up, casting green light across his face. He was too tired and weak to stand up and inspect the data for himself, but Moira's dour expression

told him all he needed to know. "I'm sorry, Hank," she said softly.

"Has there been no improvement at all?" he asked hopefully.

"The progress of the virus is still slowing."

"Well, there you are!" chimed in Bobby, trying to sound cheerful.

"It isn't good enough, Bobby," sighed Hank. "My immune system is manning the metaphorical barricades, but it is still being forced back. We need it to repel the invader."

On another day-a better day-Hank's own loquacious nature would have urged him to explain the process to his young friend again. He would have reminded Bobby that the serum with which he had injected himself was designed to react with his own mutant gene to create a new, temporary type of cell within his system: a super-cell as he had dubbed it, which would go to war with the Legacy Virus until each had cancelled the other out. Unfortunately, a course of radiation treatment was also needed to encourage the reaction to run its course.

"Are you sure you want to try again?" asked Moira. She had asked him the same question every six hours for the past three days. By now, Hank's affirmative response was almost automatic, as was their next exchange: "Are you ready for this, then?"

"As prepared as I will ever be."

Moira nodded curtly, flashed Hank a tight smile of encouragement and operated a series of controls on the nearest vertical surface of the Kree computer. A curved piece of metal slid smoothly out from the underside of Hank's bench and encircled him, until he was completely enclosed in the darkness of a flat-ended tube. He breathed in deeply in nervous anticipation, but his chest wheezed with the effort of even that small task.

Intellectually, he knew he shouldn't have been able to feel the radiation that bombarded him. Still, he couldn't help

but imagine the invisible rays ripping through his already-weakened cells. He could almost feel his dizziness and nausea—the cruel side-effects of the treatment—worsening, and his left eye was moistened by a tear as a rattling groan of pain and dismay escaped his throat.

Now, when it was too late, he began to think about what Moira had asked him. Did he really want to keep doing this? The treatments should have borne fruit by now. By continuing with them, he was clinging to a hope that became slimmer each day. At what point, he asked himself, would he have to accept failure? More than likely, he considered, the decision would be taken for him. He could tell that Moira was worried about him: she would refuse to treat him soon, for fear that his body would be unable to stand further punishment.

But he couldn't face the thought of giving up yet. He couldn't face going back to the start again, knowing that this time he would be racing against the clock; that the virus he was seeking to eradicate was coursing through his system, killing him in turn.

He thought about Moira, and immediately felt selfish. The prospect that he was dreading so much was her reality. She had contracted the Legacy Virus months ago: the first non-mutant to catch the so-called “mutant disease” but by no means the last. The symptoms had progressed slowly in her case, but the end result would be the same. She had to be under as much strain as he was right now, but she got on with her work-and with her life—with a characteristic determination, a refusal to give in to despair and death.

It was for Doctor Moira MacTaggert-and for all the people like her, now and in the years to come—that Hank knew he had to do this. Once the super-cell had been created inside his own body, it could be isolated and injected directly into other sufferers. It would save hundreds, thousands, perhaps millions of lives. That was why he had to hold on to those

last threads of hope for as long as they lasted, no matter what the cost to his own health.

His eyelids had drooped, and he had almost drifted back to sleep. He didn't notice that the curved hood of the radiation machine had slid back until he felt the recycled air of the lab pricking at the perspiration on his forehead, and heard Moira's voice. "All done!" she said with forced levity. "Now, you get back to your rest—and get better this time, do you hear?"

"I shall certainly endeavor to do so, Doctor," said Hank with a weak grin.

"Och, Henry, you'll have to do a lot better than that, I'm afraid. Our Lord and Master was in here earlier, wanting an update. I think the poor dear's getting a wee bit impatient."

"He isn't 'our Lord and Master'," snapped Hank, sounding more irritable than he had intended. Without meaning to, his fellow scientist had hit a raw nerve.

In order to gain access to this island base and its facilities, the X-Men had had to make a deal with one of their most persistent and dangerous foes. Moira herself had argued strongly against it—but when Hank had infected himself, he had forced the issue in his favor. He had believed that the possibility of finding a cure for the Legacy Virus overrode all other concerns, but the wisdom of his decision still remained to be proven.

When Doctor Henry McCoy had stuck that syringe into his arm, he had taken a gamble with more than just his own life. He had allied his team to an influential and utterly corrupt organization known as the Hellfire Club.

And to its Black King: a powerful and ruthless mutant by the name of Sebastian Shaw.

Sebastian Shaw stood on the surface of the island, in the forest clearing that housed the entranceway to the underground Kree base. An electrical storm was raging—but he maintained an easy, untroubled pose, feet apart and hands clasped behind his back, not seeming to mind the

rain that spattered around him and drenched his Victorian frock coat and breeches. His head was tilted back, his dark eyes fixed on the lightning patterns in the sky and the colors they painted on the clouds.

And on the woman who soared above the treetops.

She seemed to be one with the winds themselves, so graceful and yet so assured were her movements. Her black cloak billowed out behind her, and she stretched out her arms as she luxuriated in the raw power of Nature. From down here, Shaw couldn't tell if she was conducting the storm or simply riding it. The truth probably lay somewhere between the two extremes: it was impossible for him to say where the storm ended and the woman began.

She descended from the clouds to land a few feet in front of him. Her cloak settled slowly around her lithe body as she flicked water from her long, white hair. Above, she had seemed serene; now, white eyes stared mistrustfully out of her dark-skinned face, and Shaw could see a trace of the lightning still trapped within those eyes.

"Were you waiting to speak with me?" she asked.

"I was simply enjoying the performance, Miss Munroe."

"I was not putting on a performance, Shaw," said Ororo Munroe: the X-Man known, thanks to her command of the elements, as Storm.

Shaw inclined his head graciously. "I am aware of that," he said. "You feel claustrophobic inside our underground installation. Perhaps I can ease that discomfort."

Ororo looked suspicious, and Shaw knew what was going through her mind. The pair had been cast as bitter enemies in the past: the altruistic X-Men had often obstructed the Hellfire Club's more... extreme attempts to expand its power base. Storm didn't like having to sleep only a few rooms away from Shaw, and she avoided him when she could.

In return, he had offered her nothing but undaunted politeness. And he was beginning to feel that, slowly, her attitude towards him had thawed from cold to merely cool.

“We are a long way from civilization,” he said. “Most of your teammates have returned to America, and I... I have only one assistant to distract me from the gray walls beneath us.”

“This base is still staffed by more Hellfire Club mercenaries than I feel comfortable with,” said Ororo. “If you are feeling lonely, then perhaps you should talk to them.”

Shaw waved a dismissive hand. “I do not hire my pawns for their conversational skills.”

“I have nothing to say to you, Shaw, that you would enjoy hearing.”

“Come now, Miss Munroe, the X-Men have won this battle. This island is no longer mine—but I am not bitter. Is it too much to ask that you be equally gracious in your victory? One meal, that’s all I beg of you. The pleasure of your company for a few short hours.” “You have made this request three times before,” said Ororo. “And I pray that, this time, your answer may be different.” Shaw spread his arms wide, his palms turned upward in a gesture of appeal. “We don’t have to be on opposite sides.”

“That, I believe, is where you are mistaken.”

“Will you not concede that, in the matter of the Legacy Virus at least, we have a common goal? We both wish to see a cure, do we not?”

“A common goal, yes—but I find your methods of achieving that goal deplorable.” The X-Man’s eyes flashed angrily. “You infected scientists with the virus to force them into working for you. You kidnapped our friend, Doctor MacTaggart—and somehow you coerced our teammate, Henry McCoy, into joining you as well.”

Shaw shook his head firmly. “In McCoy’s case, no coercion was needed. He saw the benefits that a cure would bring to the world—as did you. Why else would you be here? Why didn’t you shut down our project and destroy this island? You had the opportunity.”

"The damage had already been done," contested Ororo. "There was no further harm-and as you said, a great deal to be gained-in seeing your work here through to a conclusion."

"Nevertheless, I was grateful that it was you who came to the negotiating table rather than your Mr. Summers." Scott Summers, alias Cyclops, was the X-Men's field leader: however, a short-term injury had forced him to leave his deputy to thrash out the details of an uneasy partnership. "I've always thought he was a little too rigid. I doubt he would have been as quick as you were to deal with those he considers to be his enemies."

"Our alliance is a temporary one," Ororo reminded him, "forged by necessity. It will last only until Moira, Henry and the others have completed their work."

Shaw sighed, "And you, like your friend Mr. Drake, are only here to ensure that I uphold my side of the bargain: that, if and when a cure does become available, the Hellfire Club will not have sole control over its use."

"Precisely."

"So we have been forced together, you and I. Does that mean we cannot at least be civil to each other; cannot help each other to pass the time?" Shaw raised an eyebrow and his lips curled into a wicked smile. "You only remain on this island to watch me, Ororo. As long as you continue to avoid my company, you cannot claim to be doing your job very well."

She regarded him with a hostile expression for a long moment as the rain sliced down between them. Then she said: "Stand aside, Shaw. I would like to die out inside."

He stepped out of her way, indicating the hatchway behind him with an extravagant gesture. Storm swept past him without another glance in his direction, disappearing through the aperture and down the steps beyond. As soon as she was out of the Black King's sight, the polite smile froze into a sneer on his face and his dark eyes hardened.

Sebastian Shaw was a realist. He knew that there was still a long way to go if he was ever to make Ororo Munroe his ally. But she hadn't turned down his offer this time.

The image in Selene's crystal ball faded as the Beast succumbed to unconsciousness again. She lowered it back onto its dais by force of mind alone and sat back against her velvet cushions, her pale brow furrowed in thought.

There was no love lost between her and Shaw. She had allied herself with him in the past, but only when it had proved expedient to do so. However, she knew that somebody like him might prove useful again in the future. She also knew that he would make a powerful enemy. Therefore, she had stopped short of opening outright hostilities against him.

Now, however, she had set her sights upon a prize that made the risk worth taking.

Blackheart had appeared at her side-attracted perhaps, as he often seemed to be, by her thoughts of dark ambition. She had neither heard nor sensed his approach: the demon's earthly form appeared to be sculpted from stone, but he could come and go like a shadow.

"Shaw almost has it," said Selene. "A cure to the Legacy Virus." Her Black King regarded her in confident silence, his eyes ablaze in their sockets. "I wonder what he intends to do with it..." she mused. "Oh, I've no doubt that it will figure in one of his many master plans. He will find a way of using it to further his own ambitions .. *

"But you could utilize the cure more ... effectively."

"Precisely!" Selene's lips twisted into a grin at the compliment. "Shaw has already allowed the X-Men to tie his hands. He was foolish to involve them in this game."

"Even had he not," rumbled Blackheart, "he does not possess your vision, my Queen."

"No," purred Selene. "Nor does he have the courage to change this world as I would."

"This prize would be better suited to your care, I think."

"I cannot help but agree."

"There are many who would give much for the smallest drop of such a serum. Their desperation, their fear of death, makes for an exquisite concoction."

"As you say, Blackheart, the possibilities for corruption are quite delicious."

"I only regret that I cannot accompany you to the island," said Blackheart. Selene listened for the merest hint of irritation in his voice, but heard none. He must have found the spell that bound him to this building irksome to say the least, but he rarely showed any sign of frustration at his predicament. She supposed that, for a demon of his power and longevity, it was easy to be patient. The binding of his corporeal form to one place for a few fleeting years was a minor inconvenience—especially if this was where he wished to be.

"Oh, I don't think either of us needs dirty our hands," she said. "A few lesser demons should be adequate for this task."

"Are you certain of that? You consider this Shaw a resourceful foe."

"Shaw's greatest talent is for making prudent alliances," said Selene. "His greatest failing is that he can rarely keep them. Not for the first time, his Inner Circle is crumbling around him."

"And the X-Men?"

"Little more than children," said Selene with contempt, "and their deal with Shaw means that only three of them stand in the way of our goal. Of those three, only the weather witch, Storm, poses any threat to us. The Beast is in no condition to fight anybody, and Iceman has never had the courage or the intellect to realize his true potential."

Blackheart nodded. "Then I shall summon our troops, my lady."

One year later:

WHAT HAVE you done to us, Selene?" snapped Cyclops. The question sounded inadequate in his ears, so he asked another,

—more pertinent one. "And where's our teammate?"

Only seconds earlier, victory had been in sight. The X-Men, with an unlikely ally in the person of Sebastian Shaw, had broken into the New York mansion house headquarters of the Hellfire Club in search of a kidnapped friend. After several trials—some of which Cyclops didn't even like to think about—they had reached the Black Queen's basement throne room. But even as he had thrown open the final door between his team and their goal, the world had turned black around him.

For an instant between two footsteps—an instant that had seemed at the time like an eternity but which now felt like the blink of an eyelid in his memory—he had been moving in slow-motion, his bewildered teammates picked out in negative around him.

And then the moment had ended, and Cyclops had lurched back into the real world—to find that everything had changed.

"Your friend?" repeated Selene, furrowing her brow in mock confusion but unable to suppress a telltale smile. "Ah, yes, you came here in search of Doctor Henry McCoy, the Beast. How easy to forget after all this time." Now she wore an equally insincere expression of sympathy. "I am sorry to inform you that the Beast is dead."

"If that's true," growled Wolverine, coiled like the spring of a loaded firearm and inching forward, "you're gonna wish you could join him." His eyes were still wild with the adrenaline high of battle: a high that threatened to make him lose control. His bearing was reminiscent of that of the creature after which he was named—and with his yellow and blue costume torn to expose his hirsute chest, he seemed somehow more animalistic than ever.

Cyclops shot him a warning look. He wanted to delay combat for as long as he could. He was well aware of the dozens of demons lined up behind Selene's throne; most of all, he was aware of Blackheart, who had already put the X-Men through so much. He was beginning to realize what must have happened, and it left his team at a big disadvantage. They needed, at least, to learn more about this new, unexpected situation before they acted.

Selene flicked back her long, black hair and chuckled to herself. "Oh, do please excuse my amusement," she said, "it has been a long time since anybody has dared speak to me in such a manner. I have to say, I find it quite refreshing."

Another of the X-Men stepped forward. Her red hair was disheveled, and one sleeve of her green and gold costume with its distinctive firebird motif on the chest had been shredded. A purple bruise stood out on her exposed forearm. Still, to Cyclops, the woman presented nothing less than an image of perfect beauty. Her name was Jean Grey Summers, but she was also known as Phoenix. She was his wife, and the love of his life.

"You're obviously itching to tell us something, Selene," said Phoenix. "Why don't you just get on with it?"

"If you insist." Selene's tongue flicked out of her mouth to moisten her red lips. She was relishing the moment, enjoying the expressions on the faces of her audience. "You believe that only a few minutes have passed since you faced Blackheart and my demons on the lower levels of this building and in the catacombs beneath them. You are wrong. My throne room, you see, was not undefended. I had the foresight to mark its door with a series of powerful magical glyphs—invisible to your eyes, of course. When you raced in here, so eager to save your friend and dispense justice to she who had taken him, you activated my spell. You were transported almost precisely one year into the future."

"No ..." whispered Cyclops.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Selene smirked. “You will have plenty of opportunity to confirm that what I am telling you is the truth. For now, all you need to know is that the balance of power on this world has shifted somewhat in your absence.”

“What happened to the Beast?” blurted out Iceman from somewhere behind Cyclops.

Selene responded with an indifferent shrug. “What does it matter? You mortals live such short lives anyway, they are hardly worth mourning. The Beast has been dead for almost as long as you have been gone. The important thing is what he left behind. He bequeathed me a useful inheritance: the cure for a disease that has ravaged our kind.”

Cyclops knew what she was talking about without having to ask. What he didn’t know was how he ought to feel about it. He was numbed by the news of the Beast’s passing: it had all happened so suddenly, he couldn’t take it in yet. But the revelation that Hank had achieved his fondest ambition, by finding a cure for the deadly Legacy Virus before his death, was a pinprick of hope in a descending veil of gloom. At the same time, the knowledge that that cure was in the hands of somebody as evil as Selene chilled him to the bone.

He felt a familiar anxiety in the pit of his stomach: the sickly realization that he had lost control of events.

For as long as he could remember, Scott Summers had known the importance of control. The red blasts of energy which emanated from his eyes could only be held in check by his own eyelids, or by a shield of ruby quartz such as that which made up the lens of his visor. His own mutant power was a potential threat to everybody around him, and he could never allow himself to forget that for a second.

Control had become even more vital to him when Professor Charles Xavier had recruited him for his original X-Men team, and appointed him its field leader. As Cyclops, Scott had to remain forever alert, plan for every contingency. There was always somebody ready to take out

a grudge against the embattled mutants: a xenophobic human, a mutant whose ideals clashed with Xavier's or perhaps just a megalomaniac bent on proving something to the world. An attack could come at any moment, and from any quarter.

For Cyclops, then, there was nothing worse than this: not knowing where—or rather when—he was, not knowing what forces were stacked up against him. If Selene was telling the truth, if he really had been gone for a year, then he dreaded to think what might have happened in his absence. Given the Black Queen's confident demeanor, he could only guess that the Beast's death was just the first in a series of close-to-home tragedies about which he was already too late to do a thing.

"I assume you didn't use the cure for humanitarian purposes," said Phoenix archly.

"On the contrary, Ms. Grey," smirked Selene, "there isn't a person on Manhattan Island who doesn't owe his or her life to me. I supply the medicine that keeps New York City alive."

"The entire population is infected with Legacy?" gasped Storm. "But of course," said Selene as if it were obvious. With a playful glint in her eye, she added: "All eight hundred of them. Give or take a few, of course. It has become so difficult to keep track of all the new arrivals ... and departures."

Cyclops swallowed, fighting down a cry of disbelief.

"You see, my friends, *homo sapiens* were never going to accept *homo superior*. Mutants could never have integrated into a human world: it is, sadly, only too natural for any species to rail against the one that is destined to replace it. So, I created a haven for our kind—a haven under my rule. I erected a mystical barrier around Manhattan Island, through which only mutants may pass."

"I don't believe you," said Phoenix defiantly. "What about the humans who were already here? The Avengers... the

Fantastic Four... they wouldn't have let you do that!"

"I have lived too long a life to be a fool, Ms. Grey. I waited until New York's colorful champions were out of town before I made my move. No matter how great their powers, without the mutant x-factor in their genes, they cannot penetrate my shield." Phoenix opened her mouth to protest again, but Selene waved a preemptory hand. "Oh, yes, some still opposed me. New York, it transpires, housed an impressive number of small-time vigilantes: Spider-Man, Daredevil and all the rest. And then there were the mutants, of course, whom my barrier did not repel: altruists such as X-Force and the remaining X-Men; those who came here alone to challenge me for their own purposes; the Avengers even put together an all-mutant team. I might have been defeated had all those forces deigned to work together." She curled back her top lip to display her teeth, "Instead ... they died."

"What about the other humans?" asked Cyclops tersely. "The ones without powers?" His throat was dry, and he didn't want to think about how many deaths of good friends had just been dismissed by Selene in a few words.

"I am not needlessly vindictive, Mr. Summers. I allowed the human population of this island to leave in safety." Selene's white face darkened. "Unfortunately, many of them chose not to heed my warnings. I don't think I have ever encountered such a stubborn herd in all my centuries. It took many deaths to drive out the last of them." She smiled again, as if enjoying a pleasant memory. "Of course, their life energies were most welcome. It will be some time before I have to worry about prolonging my own existence farther." Then the smile was gone, and the Black Queen's eyes hardened. "This is a city of mutants now. *My* city. And you, my friends, will fit in well."

Cyclops clenched his fists. "If you think we're going to allow this twisted game of yours to continue, Selene, you'd better think again."

The Black Queen threw back her head and laughed. “You talk as if you have a choice. The truth is that, once you are infected, you will be trapped like the rest of my subjects, reliant upon regular doses of my serum to survive.”

She made a tiny gesture with one hand, and her demon helpers moved forward. Cyclops tensed, prepared for battle although his aching muscles complained that it was too soon. He rested two fingers of his yellow-gloved right hand upon the sensor in his palm, ready to open his visor and unleash his optic blasts. He scanned the approaching creatures: they came in all shapes and sizes, but each of their ghoulish faces was twisted into an expression of eager malice. Their skin was parchment-thin and lined with cracks, and their bared fangs and raised talons dripped with a clear liquid, which glinted in the flickering candlelight.

“They’ve got poison on their teeth and claws,” warned Wolverine, sniffing the air. His highly developed sense of smell would have confirmed the evidence of his eyes.

Cyclops nodded. “The Legacy Virus,” he surmised.

The demons sprang, and their would-be victims—despite their weariness, both physical and mental—responded like the components of a well-honed machine. Cyclops let loose with a wide-angled blast, not powerful enough to cause much harm but calculated to stun as many of his foes as possible and leave them vulnerable to the others.

Storm took to the air, the raised ceiling of the throne room working in her favor. From her vantage point out of the demons’ reach, she could take time to survey the battleground without fear of attack from behind, and deploy her elemental powers where they would do the most good. Her first fork of lightning sliced through the air and struck the foremost demon as it was aiming a swipe at Cyclops: it rocked on its heels, its eyes wide with surprise in its charred face, and then it crumpled.

Wolverine favored a more direct approach, barreling into the demons’ front rank and bringing down four of the

startled creatures like a row of dominoes. Two sets of three claws each—sheathed in adamantium, the hardest known metal—had extruded from the backs of his hands, and spots of viscous, black demon blood burst into the air as he lashed out. Wolverine didn't need much of an excuse to give in to his feral side, and the non-human nature of his opponents was enough.

Rogue too ploughed forward, her fists flailing. Her particular mutant ability was that she temporarily acquired the physical and mental characteristics of anyone she touched with her bare skin. Her control over this power had lessened with time, and she had come to think of it as more of a curse than a blessing. She wore a hooded green bodysuit which left only her face exposed, lest she inadvertently brush against somebody and be overwhelmed by alien thoughts. However, she also possessed tremendous strength and the ability to fly—she had taken both from somebody a long time ago, and thanks to a terrible accident, they had never faded—which made her one of the X-Men's most useful hand-to-hand fighters.

Between them, the pair kept many of the demons occupied, but others poured around them and tried to surround their teammates. Storm conjured a wind to blow the right hand flank off its collective feet, while Iceman converted atmospheric moisture into a frozen barrier to the left. In the process, however, he left his back open to two demons who had fought their way past Rogue. In his ice form, protected by a thick coat of frozen armor, he might have been able to deflect their claws—but Cyclops wasn't about to take that chance. He downed them with two rapid-fire optic blasts. Beside him, Phoenix's green eyes flashed red as she thinned the odds against Rogue by telekinetically levitating four demons into the air. Bewildered and disoriented, thrashing their arms and legs, they were easy prey for Storm: the wind-rider cast them into the darkest corners of the room, from which they didn't return.

This was where long hours of training paid off. The demons were scrambling to reach their targets, pushing each other aside and trampling their fallen, but the X-Men were used to each other's abilities and fighting styles, and well practiced in their own, and they worked in harmony. They didn't even need to speak: Phoenix, a telepath as well as a telekinetic, opened a mental channel between them so that they could discuss tactics without being overheard.

We can't win this one, sent Cyclops, kicking aside a fallen demon, which had tried to sink its poisoned teeth into his ankle.

I concur, echoed the thoughts of Phoenix in his mind. Despite the situation, he allowed himself a tiny smile at the telepathic touch of his lover. *Selene and Blackheart are content to watch for now—but we're in no condition to fight them should that change.*

That was certainly true. Selene was not only a powerful sorceress and an energy vampire but also a mutant, with powers of telepathy, pyrokinesis and molecular control over inanimate objects. With the son of Mephisto at her side, she would be near impossible to beat even under ideal circumstances.

Which I suspect it soon will, sent Storm. *We are gaining the advantage over the demons.*

Then I suggest we get out of here! Wolverine's thoughts manifested themselves in an internal voice as gruff as his external one. *Much as I enjoy cutting these critters into shish kabobs, they're costing us precious time and effort—and I'm sure it'll be no great sweat for Selene to replace them.*

Agreed, returned Cyclops. *Time to fall back to the door, people. I'll take the point. Storm and Rogue, you're fighting a rearguard action. Nightcrawler, run interference.*

Nightcrawler was the X-Men's resident teleporter. In some people's eyes—generally those who hadn't experienced his kindness, his generosity and his unstinting chivalry—he

also resembled a demon himself, or at best a malevolent goblin. His skin was indigo blue in color, and he tended to disappear in shadows. His eyes, in contrast, were a luminous saffron yellow-and his ears and teeth grew to fine points as did his long, thin tail. As if to complete the effect, he left behind a fierce pop of imploding air and a dark billow of brimstone-scented smoke as he disappeared from Cyclops's side to reappear in the demons' midst. He gave them a second to react to his presence before bracing himself against the shoulders of two of them, taking a prodigious leap upward and kicking out with his white-booted, three-toed feet at the faces of the creatures who had inadvertently supported him. Claws sliced through the air, but Nightcrawler tucked his knees into his chest and somersaulted out of their reach. Kurt Wagner had been brought up in a German circus, and the acrobatic skills he had learned there complemented his mutant abilities well.

The demons jostled to escape as he unfolded himself and fell back towards them, feet first. He vanished again as they closed in on the space where he had been. When he reappeared a second later, he was holding a dusty tapestry that he must have wrenched from one of the recesses of the room. He dropped it neatly over six demons and danced on their covered heads until their fellows came too close for comfort, whereupon he teleported three more times in quick succession, keeping them confused and busy.

Sprinting for the door, Cyclops emerged into a corridor that was much as he remembered it: deep-carpeted and wood-paneled, lined with expensive paintings, speaking of a quiet opulence that contrasted with his infernal surroundings of a moment before. At least his geographical position had not changed, then. He counted out his teammates behind him, ushering them towards the stairs that led up to street level. Iceman was first, followed by Phoenix and then Wolverine. The latter was reluctant to disengage from the battle, and Cyclops was relieved when

he finally chose to obey orders. Wolverine possessed an accelerated healing factor, which allowed him to shrug off most wounds, but it was not likely to help him against the Legacy Virus should it penetrate his bloodstream.

Next came Sebastian Shaw-and Cyclops was alarmed by the realization that, with so much else to think about, he had lost track of the erstwhile Black King during the melee. To judge by his appearance alone, Shaw had been left untouched by the demon attack. He was unruffled, still holding himself with characteristic confidence, and he made his withdrawal from the throne room seem unhurried. Perhaps it was just that he had the ability to absorb the kinetic energy of any blow directed at him and turn it into power; however, even his green boiler suit displayed no cuts or even stains. Cyclops had noticed before that Shaw seemed to be able to stand aloof, blending into the background as combat raged around him. It was as if he considered it beneath his dignity to dirty his hands, although he certainly wasn't averse to using his amplified strength when he felt it was required. Scott berated himself inwardly for having taken his eye off his famously treacherous ally: Shaw had worked with Selene more than once in the past, and the X-Men's leader had been half expecting a betrayal ever since he had grudgingly agreed to accept his assistance. He wished he had seen how Shaw had reacted to the Black Queen's revelations.

Storm backed out of the throne room next, still using her winds to keep the demons at bay. Those who fought against the ferocious air currents found themselves on the receiving end of Rogue's sledgehammer fists. Her green costume took several cuts, but the skin beneath it was almost invulnerable and no claws could puncture it.

From the foot of the stairs, Cyclops heard the familiar *bamf* sound of Nightcrawler's teleportation, which told him that the German X-Man had joined the evacuation and was indeed now ahead of him. "We're all out!" he yelled, and

Rogue fell back into the corridor and allowed the demons to spill out after her. She and Cyclops fled after their teammates, Scott glancing over his shoulder and delivering another wide-angled burst from his eyes to discourage pursuit.

No other obstacles stood between the X-Men and the main doors of the Hellfire Club's mansion house. But as they emerged onto New

York's Fifth Avenue, all eight mutants found themselves brought to a stunned halt.

Cyclops was the first to recover his senses and to check behind him, to be sure that the demons hadn't followed their prey up the stairs. They hadn't. Perhaps they were afraid of the daylight, such as it was. More likely, he suspected, Selene had not wanted them to interfere with this moment. She was probably watching now with her crystal ball. She had allowed her foes to escape so that they could witness the full horror of what she had done.

Their surroundings were familiar, and yet at the same time eerily different. The buildings of New York City were still standing, although some had been blackened by fire or daubed with graffiti-but their dirty windows were dark and empty. Deprived of the crowds that had once pumped through them like their lifeblood, the buildings seemed forlorn and bereft of purpose.

A thin late November wind whipped through the overgrown vegetation of Central Park across the street. It blew along the empty road that had once been clogged with taxicabs and tourist buses, and sent a wave of discarded cans and papers clattering and rustling ahead of it. Wolverine wrinkled his nose in distaste, but Cyclops didn't need his teammate's enhanced senses to detect the odor of rotting garbage and backed-up sewage: the stench of decay.

The sky was white—but it was an imperfect, dirty white, across which ripples of some darker energy occasionally passed. There were no birds beneath this strange canopy,

no songs or beating of wings to distract from the dreadful silence that hung over what had once been one of the noisiest and busiest cities in the world.

“Home sweet home,” said Iceman dryly, but his attempt at black humor was undermined by the dismayed tone of his voice.

“Such defiant spirits,” rumbled Blackheart. “I look forward to breaking them.”

“You will have your chance tomorrow,” Selene promised him, “when they return.”

The Black Queen’s business had gone well, and now it was time for a little recreation. The royal couple were enjoying a stroll around the basement levels of the Hellfire Club building, en route to the catacombs. They had reached the corridor that ran behind the nightmare chambers, and the paneled wall was lined with paintings of some of Selene’s most persistent enemies trapped in a variety of soul-destroying scenarios. Every few seconds, the pictures underwent subtle changes as they updated themselves. She savored the images, knowing that they represented the tortured dreams of the captive minds behind them.

In answer to her Black King’s unspoken question, she continued: “Oh yes, I know my adversaries well, Blackheart, and I have had a long time to prepare for their arrival. They will fall eagerly into the trap set by our Inner Circle: our Black Bishops, our Rook and, most importantly of all, our loyal Black Knight. They will return to this building willingly, under the pathetic delusion that they still have a prayer of defeating us.”

“And they will join their vanquished mentor in eternal torment.” Selene pursed her lips as she followed Blackheart’s gaze to one particular painting. As self-inflicted Hells went, she considered the one dreamed up by the X-Men’s founder, Charles Xavier, quite banal. Still, the pain it caused him was both real and sweet enough. Xavier dreamt of a future in which mutants were branded with numbers.

Their identities were recorded in a long row of gray filing cabinets, and any use of their abilities was subject to the conditions of a special license. Any infringement of those conditions was punishable by incarceration in a maximum security prison. Xavier himself did not have to endure the harsh regime of such an institution, but he was forced to watch as those he had once considered his charges, his fellow mutants, suffered in his stead. He had failed them.

"Some of them, perhaps," purred Selene, thinking that perhaps she would set Xavier free soon, let him see the future that *she* had made. His nightmares might become more colorful then. "Cyclops, Phoenix, Wolverine, Storm ... those who provide us with good sport. Those with whom we might like to play again some day. The others, we can discard."

"And Shaw?"

"I have a special fate in store for him." Selene smiled to herself as she continued along the corridor, passing images of the Scarlet Witch, the mutant from the future known as Cable and Daimon Hellstrom, the man who had once presumed to be her White King. As the son of a powerful demon himself, Hellstrom knew exactly what dire underworlds awaited the blemished soul, and his nightmare scenario was especially edifying.

Confined beside him was one of the world's most powerful mutants and certainly one of its most arrogant and ruthless, now humbled at last. "Ah, Magneto," Selene whispered fondly as she caressed the painted face of the master of magnetism with her long fingernails. "You too were a member of our Inner Circle once. Is it foolish of me to harbor the faint hope that you might serve us again?"

"His will is yet strong," said Blackheart, "but perhaps in time, once he has been worn down by decades spent in the death camps and gas chambers of his mind ..

They walked on in silence for a moment before the demon spoke again. "It is a shame that the X-Men cannot

spend a while longer in our city.”

“Their own impatience will force an early showdown,” said Selene. “I have merely ensured that we are aware of the time and place before it happens.”

Blackheart nodded. “They are afraid, perhaps, of how this environment will affect them. The rules of their old world mean nothing here. The X-Men may come to fear for their souls, and rightly so. They have only recently wrestled with their dark sides; they do not know how far they might have to go—how far they are *prepared* to go—to preserve their lives. I will be interested to learn the answers to those questions.”

“And yet,” said Selene, “they will not leave, although the barrier would not obstruct them.”

“It is the very purity of the hero’s soul that endangers itself,” said Blackheart. “Such has it always been. And I—like you, my Queen— would have it no other way.”

“Selene, it seems, was being truthful with us—about one thing at least.” Storm glided back to her waiting teammates on a gentle air current. She dismissed the tiny pang of reluctance she felt at having to end her communion with the elements so soon and return to a world of gray concrete. “I flew a dozen blocks in each direction, but saw only one young man. He ran from me and took refuge inside a building. The city is almost deserted.”

The very nature of Manhattan made aerial reconnaissance difficult. Storm had had to climb above its highest skyscrapers, far from the streets that she was meant to be searching. When the boy in his ragged clothes had seen her swooping towards him and had taken flight, she had been too far away to stop him, to reassure him that she meant him no harm. She hadn’t followed him: she had been under instructions not to walk into potential danger alone.

“Nobody else?” asked Cyclops glumly.

“There is a fire burning on the far side of Central Park, but I could see nobody through the trees.”

“We should check it out,” said Cyclops. His initial shock at the state of his home town had passed and, as always, he had shut away his feelings behind a mask of grim urgency, determined that they shouldn’t get in the way of his handling of the situation. “OK people, we’ve got a missing year to fill in, which means we need to do a little fact-finding. There are approximately eight hundred mutants in this city, and some of them could be old friends. We need to know who the players are, who’s on our side, and we need to find out as much as we can about Selene’s habits and potential weaknesses. Now there doesn’t seem to be any immediate danger, but that could change at any time. I think we should split up to cover more ground, but only into teams of four, and Jean should keep us linked telepathically.” “We should also investigate Avengers Mansion,” said Phoenix. “Chances are it’s been gutted already, but we might be able to salvage some of their communications equipment and make contact with them-or with one of the other mutant groups.”

“Heck,” said Rogue, “the length of time we’ve been gone, there’s probably a whole new crew of X-Men out there.” She was trying to sound cheerful but she probably realized, as did Storm, that that any such team was bound to have faced Selene already, and lost.

“Worth taking a look down the sewers too,” said Wolverine. “It wouldn’t be the first time our kind has been forced into hiding in those pipes.”

“OK,” said Cyclops. “Phoenix, Nightcrawler, Iceman, you’re with me. We’ll investigate that fire in the park, scout around the Upper West Side and then drop down into the sewers. Storm, you and the others take Avengers Mansion, then continue downtown.”

The X-Men did as they were ordered, dividing into two groups without question. Still, Storm felt a flutter in her

stomach as she realized that, along with Wolverine and Rogue, she had been teamed with Shaw. It seemed to her that she had hardly enjoyed a moment away from his scrutiny since she had dined with him on the Kree island.

In the clinical surroundings of his scientific base beneath an island in the North Pacific Ocean, Sebastian Shaw had made Ororo Munroe an offer. She still had no idea whether or not she would accept it. Every time she tried to think about it, her thoughts went round and round in circles until her head hurt. Without meaning to— and despite the fact that there were more important things to consider—she found herself dwelling upon the details of the offer again now. She couldn't deny that it was enticing; perhaps more so than it ought to have been. And perhaps, she thought, that was the problem.

She was aware of Shaw's intense eyes upon her, almost looking through her as if he knew what she was thinking. She felt as if she had lived with this burden, this unmade decision, for weeks, but in fact her conversation with the Black King had taken place only one day ago.

One year and one day ago, she corrected herself, and this stark reminder of the X-Men's immediate predicament served to refocus her mind.

The Avengers' former base was only a few blocks away, down Fifth Avenue. "I'll fly ahead," said Storm. "Wolverine, I want you to take the rear and watch out for an attack from behind. Under the circumstances, we have to consider this entire city hostile."

Shaw, she thought, would just have to wait a little longer for his answer.

CHAPTER 4

ORORO DIDN'T know if she was doing the right thing.

There were no mirrors in the underground Kree base, and the

__metal walls were too dull to hold a reflection. She couldn't see

low she looked, but she felt like a princess.

She had found the dress waiting for her when she had returned to her room after her conversation with Shaw on the island's surface. It had been lying, wrapped in brown paper, on her bed. The accompanying note had simply given her a time: 1900—7:00 **p.m.** There had been no name attached to it, but Ororo had never doubted the identity of her benefactor.

At first, irritated by Shaw's presumptuousness, she had left the parcel unopened. But curiosity had got the better of her. Anyway, she had arrived on the island without a single change of clothes, and stayed for far longer than she had intended. She had been wearing her black X-Men costume for a week now-and although she had washed it with a localized rainstorm and dried it with warm air, it still felt dirty and uncomfortable.

The red dress, on the other hand, felt better than it had any right to. The silk slid across her skin like the hand of a lover, flattering the curves of her body without trying to restrict them. It exposed one rounded shoulder, and made her seem as if she were gliding across the floor when she walked. It made her feel desirable, even sensuous. In her line of work, with her chaotic lifestyle, this was a rare treat indeed.

The dress, with its designer label, probably cost more than any inhabitant of Ororo's native Kenya could earn in a year-and yet Shaw had paid for it without a thought, and

given it to an enemy, as part of a cat and mouse game he had chosen to play today. And for what purpose? Just to keep himself from becoming bored?

She shouldn't have played his game, but she didn't think she could help herself.

At precisely seven o'clock, there was a soft tap at her door. She hesitated for a second before opening it, suddenly self-conscious, realizing that she had already compromised herself by putting on the dress. She wondered how she would explain herself if her visitor turned out to be Iceman or Moira MacTaggert, even though that was unlikely.

It was just like Shaw, she thought, to have anticipated her doubts; to know that, left to herself, she might never have taken that first step out of her room.

He hadn't even come for her personally, hadn't given her the chance to slam the door in his face. He had sent one of the Hellfire Club's hired mercenaries. The man was dressed in the red and blue uniform and blank-faced, skin-colored mask of his organization. He also wore a white dinner jacket and bow tie. As he executed a formal bow, Ororo couldn't help but giggle at the incongruity of it. Her anticipation thus dispelled, if only for a second, she found herself taking his proffered arm and allowing him to lead her out into the corridor.

Somehow, without Ororo ever having taken a firm decision, a meeting with Shaw—if not an actual dinner date—had become an inevitability. She tried to prepare herself. She didn't know how to react to him, what she should say. Perhaps she ought to throw his meal back in his face, metaphorically if not literally; tell him exactly what she thought of his attempts to manipulate her, turn around and walk away. But then, she was already wearing the red dress. So, perhaps she would play him at his own game instead—only she would show him that she wasn't as suited as he might expect to the role of the mouse.

The agent led Ororo down several flights of stairs, deeper and deeper into the base, and a familiar anxiety rose within her. As Shaw well knew—as he had said to her on the surface—she suffered from a fear of enclosed spaces. She had managed to conquer that fear, but it never quite went away. She tried not to think about the weight of the island above her, of what might happen if the walls of the facility should buckle beneath it. She tried not to think about being buried under rubble, unable to move as she had once been, a lifetime ago.

She must have reached the lowest level of the base, because the stairs went no further. Down here, the walls throbbed in rhythm with the generators hidden behind them. By now she was ready for anything, suspecting every shadow, afraid that Shaw's invitation—and the red dress—had been no more than an elaborate plan to lure her into an ambush. Would he really be so brazen? Even if he could overpower her and hide her body down here, if he could feign ignorance of her disappearance, the others would still be suspicious. They would call in the rest of the X-Men.

Unless Bobby, Hank and Moira were even now walking into similar traps.

The agent pulled open a door and ushered her into the green-tinted light beyond. Ororo's hand hovered over the pocket in which she had secreted her comm-set—her direct line to her teammates—but she passed him with her head held high, determined not to betray her apprehension. She failed to hide her surprise, however, at the sight that greeted her.

She was in a huge, semicircular room, and the curved wall facing her was transparent. It was the first window she had seen in the Kree base, and she had always imagined—she hadn't been able to stop herself, especially at night—rocks pressing in behind the metal walls. Here, however, she was beneath the island itself, looking out across the crystal clear Pacific Ocean at the unspoiled works of Nature. Green

fronds waved gently in the underwater currents as shrimp and cod swam by, blithely unaware of her eyes upon them. Patches of underwater algae clung to vast outcrops of rock and shingle, providing a touch of pastel color to the panorama, and she caught her breath at the beauty of it all.

"Do you like it?" asked Sebastian Shaw. He stood in front of the window, his unblinking eyes upon her, hands clasped behind his back, his face illuminated by the emerald light.

"Veiy much," said Ororo.

"We could dine on the surface if you'd prefer," he said, "but I thought we would be more comfortable in here. I find the view quite soothing."

"It's perfect," said Ororo, despite herself.

Shaw inclined his head graciously. Set up beside him was a rectangular dining table with a white cloth and napkins and a place setting at each end. He pulled back a chair and waited for Ororo to take it. "I'm glad you decided to wear the dress," he said. "I think it suits you."

"It's a perfect fit," she said. "How did you know my size?"

Shaw gave her a half-smile. "I have a talent for such things, one of my non-mutant gifts." More likely, thought Ororo, he had had his telepathic personal assistant, Tessa, pluck the information from her mind. She considered leveling the accusation against him, but it felt too soon to break the mood of strained formality. Let him make his move first, she thought. She still hadn't found out what he expected to gain from this assignation.

Shaw took a seat opposite her, rolled back the cuffs of his velvet smoking jacket and clapped his hands twice. Immediately, the door opened again and three of his lackeys appeared. Each was dressed in the same manner as Ororo's erstwhile escort, but their masks made it impossible to tell if any of them was the same man. The first agent brought a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and, at Shaw's signal, poured a glass for each of the diners. The second agent bore two large plates, which he set down in front of them.

They contained king prawns in their shells, in a red sauce. The third agent placed two silver bowls in the center of the table, and lifted the lids with a flourish to reveal steaming rice and noodles.

"I hope this meets with your approval," said Shaw as his colorfully clad waiters departed in silence. "I had the ingredients—and the chef—flown over from Hong Kong this morning."

Ororo thought the food looked and smelled wonderful—but rather than flatter her host with another compliment, she said, "It all seems a little extravagant."

"I place little value on money," said Shaw with a shrug. Ororo raised an eyebrow pertinently, and he smiled. "It has no intrinsic worth, it is simply a means to an end."

"And your end, in this case, is ... ?"

"Simply to enjoy good company and intellectual discourse."

He raised his glass toward her, but she did not respond. "I know you better than that, Shaw. There is an ulterior motive behind your invitation. There always is." He smiled again, but did not contradict her. She stared at him with narrowed eyes for a moment. Then she sighed, lifted her glass and clinked it softly against his.

"You have never appeared short of company," said Ororo as she ladled rice onto her plate.

"I am often surrounded by people," said Shaw. "It is not the same thing."

"I believe you were close to Madelyne Pryor." She tried to make the statement sound as casual as possible: she began to eat and concentrated upon her plate, avoiding Shaw's gaze. Madelyne had once been a member of the X-Men, but she had become a bitter foe. Shaw had taken her into his Inner Circle—and if the rumors were true, into his bed too.

"I am under no illusions about Madelyne Pryor," he said stiffly. Ororo glanced up to see that his expression had

darkened. "I took a succubus to my chest. Now she has gone."

"Oh?" Ororo was genuinely surprised.

Shaw met her gaze and, in a perfectly even voice, he elaborated: "She could not get what she wanted from me. Therefore, she left. No doubt she has returned to her pet, the Grey boy." He was talking about Nathan Grey: a mutant from an alternative dimension, the son of an alternative version of Ororo's teammate, Jean Grey. Ororo was aware from Jean's reports that Nathan and Madelyne had been spending time together, although even Jean didn't know the precise nature of their relationship. "Perhaps she will return," said Shaw. "She has done so in the past. She has also betrayed me in the past, although she thinks me unaware of it. Perhaps I will not see her again." He shrugged as if he did not care either way, but Ororo thought she detected a flicker of sadness in his eyes.

"And your Black Queen? She has defected to the Hellfire Club's New York branch, has she not?" It was an impolite question, and she wasn't sure why she had asked it. Perhaps it was because she had rarely seen anything get under Shaw's skin, and some malicious part of her had wanted to see if she could unsettle him further.

"Selene has made no move against me."

"Not this time," said Ororo, "not yet. But she has betrayed you before."

"In that, she is no different to many people."

"True. And yet you continue to strike these dangerous alliances: Madelyne, Trevor Fitzroy, Donald Pierce ... are you really so bad a judge of character?"

Shaw held his expression carefully neutral, but his eyes had darkened. "As I have already said, I labor under no illusions. In my business, the stakes are invariably high. I choose my partners for what they can offer me, even if only in the short term. I deal with the great and the powerful or with those who have the potential to be both. I expect no

less of such people than to seek to use me in return. And once they have taken what they want from me, or more likely found that is not for the taking, they will turn on me like snakes." "As you would them," said Ororo, "if the situation were reversed." Shaw inclined his head as if accepting the truth of the accusation. Feeling daring, Ororo added: "As did your son."

There was silence for a moment. Then Shaw cracked open a prawn, and the sharp retort resounded around the spacious room. "I taught Shinobi well," he said quietly, grim-faced.

"And he tried to kill you. We thought he had succeeded."

"He disappointed me."

"Is that all, Shaw?"

"You misunderstand, my dear. He disappointed me because, when I returned from the dead-so to speak-he chose to flee, to go into hiding, rather than face me."

"Perhaps he had good reason." Shaw didn't answer that, and his expression was inscrutable. Ororo changed tack.

"Then you have no idea where he is?"

"I should rather ask that question of you," said Shaw.

"You have spoken with him far more recently than I; indeed, I understand the two of you shared a great deal."

Ororo's startled eyes flicked upward towards him—she couldn't stop them-and she felt sure that he could read the guilt therein. He smiled, probably with satisfaction at having disconcerted her, having turned the tables. "My dear Miss Munroe," he said pleasantly, "you must realize that there are some things a son simply cannot keep from his father."

"My relationship with Shinobi was extremely brief," she said coldly, "and not entered into by choice on my part." She had pushed the whole affair to the back of her mind. Had she not, then Shaw could never have taken her by surprise like this.

"I am well aware of the circumstances of your dalliance." Abandoning his meal, Shaw leaned forward with an eager

glint in his eye. "But tell me, my dear, do you really believe that even the most powerful hypnotic drug can cause somebody—an X-Man, no less, one of the most strong-willed people I have ever encountered—to completely betray her nature?"

"What are you implying?"

"That on some level—oh, one buried deep within your subconscious mind, I don't doubt it—you were attracted to my son."

"No," said Ororo firmly.

"It is understandable," continued Shaw as if she hadn't spoken. "A younger man; a handsome man, I am led to believe; a man with so much power. The head of the Hellfire Club's most influential Inner Circle, no less, at that time. You have always been attracted to powerful men, haven't you, Ororo? And if those men have a touch of the darkness about them—as most powerful men have—then so much the better."

She was lost for words. Half of her wanted to jump to her feet, to slap him across the face and leave, but she refused to let him see her lose her cool. Her blood had rushed to her cheeks in shame, and she still wasn't sure how Shaw had managed to turn the conversation around so that it was now her life, not his, that was under scrutiny. He was playing her at her own game, she realized, and winning. She had to regain control, but she didn't know how—because in her heart she feared that what the Black King had said was true.

"I apologize," said Shaw, although he sounded insincere. "I did not mean to embarrass you. I myself know how seductive power can be." "I do not agree. The old adage that it corrupts is, in my experience, well founded."

"Or perhaps it is just that the corrupt seek power."

"Either way," Ororo snapped, "you are wrong." She took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. Bad enough that he had touched a raw nerve; she didn't have to let him know it.

“Are you sure?” asked Shaw with a hint of amusement. “Would you have accepted a dinner invitation from Fitzroy? Or Tessa? Or from one of my uniformed agents?”

Ororo set down her cutlery with an annoyed clatter. “Is that what this is about? Do you expect me to profess my undying admiration for you? A secret crush? If so, Shaw, then you overestimate your own charms. Like the people with whom you deal, you are a snake. A ruthless, selfish, amoral man. You represent everything I find loathsome in humanity.”

“More so than the infamous Victor Von Doom?”

Ororo winced. Shaw seemed to know everything about her life, her every failing. Her relationship with Doom—the ruler of a small European nation, and probably one of the most evil men in the world—had never had a chance to get started, but there had certainly been a spark between them. The memory of it often haunted her.

Shaw abandoned his food too, and leaned back in his chair. He rested his hands on his chest, interlacing his fingers. “You may not like me, Ororo, but I possess everything you desire.”

“No,” she said bluntly.

“I beg to disagree. Why did you join the X-Men? Why do you wear that garish costume and make yourself a target for those who would render our kind extinct? I think your Professor Xavier offered you something you wanted; something for which you would do anything.”

“The Professor awakened me to my responsibilities, that is all.”

“I think he did more than that. You were born into a poor country, Ororo. You saw suffering all around you. You watched as people died, knowing that humanity had the ability but not the political will

to prevent those deaths. Even in better times, in the rainforest where you were worshipped as a goddess, you

must have felt unfulfilled.” “You presume to know a great deal about my feelings.”

“We are not so dissimilar, you and I.”

“Now it is I who must disagree.”

“I am right though, aren’t I? You had the adulation of a superstitious tribe—you had power over them-but it was not enough, because they in turn were powerless. When you were offered a chance to change the world, you took it But that was a long time ago, Ororo, and it is time you asked yourself: did Xavier live up to his promise? Is your life with the X-Men everything you thought—and hoped-it would be?”

“We have made many things better.”

“You have had some minor victories, nothing more. You have failed to halt, much less reverse, the deterioration in mutant-human relations. After all your hard-won battles, all your personal sacrifices, you are further than ever from achieving Xavier’s much-vaunted dream.”

“We have prevented people like you from making the situation worse,” said Ororo.

“You have addressed some of the symptoms of the problem,” countered Shaw. “You are a long way from tackling the causes. Meanwhile, people still die in the Third World.”

Ororo looked down, her lips set into a sullen scowl. “There is only so much we can do. I have learned that lesson.”

Shaw shook his head. “No, no, no, no. One man, to use another old adage, can move mountains-but only with the right lever. And in this world of ours, it is financial and political power that affects real change. You can deny that if you like-you can cling to a dream that can never be realized-or you can accept the system and work it to your own advantage.” Shaw leaned forward again. “Between the Hellfire Club and my own company, Shaw Industries, I control vast sums of money. I have the ear of presidents, judges and, most importantly, the captains of industry. I can

change the lives of thousands of people in real, practical ways in an instant. Can you honestly tell me that you would refuse such power, Miss Munroe; that you could not find a single positive use to which to put it?"

Ororo had butterflies in her stomach and prickles down her back. Shaw was saying nothing that she hadn't thought herself a thousand times before. Not that she intended to tell him so-but then she couldn't bring herself to lie to him either. Instead, in as steady a voice as she could muster, she asked: "What are you suggesting?"

"Join me," he said.

She started, her eyes widening. "You are proposing an alliance?"

"The Inner Circle must remain strong-and of late, it has become depleted. Only two of us remain, and I would not lay odds on Fitzroy's continued loyalty. You, my dear, would make an excellent Lord Cardinal. So determined, so self-assured, so ambitious ..

"It did not work before," she reminded him. Some time ago, she had shared the rank of White King in Shaw's Inner Circle with the X-Men's long-time adversary-at that point, an uneasy friend-Mag-neto. It had been, so she had thought, an opportunity to broker a new peace between at least some of the various mutant factions. It had not lasted. Magneto, like so many before and after him, had turned against Shaw. In time, he had turned against the X-Men as well. Ororo had attended only one full meeting of the Lords Cardinal, and she had achieved nothing.

"This time," said Shaw, "you would be a member in your own right."

"I would not be your pawn."

"Indeed not," he agreed. "You would be my White Queen."

She didn't have to ask what that meant. Sebastian Shaw was the Black King. As the White Queen, she would be his equal, at least in theory; the head of the opposing house.

She could even, subject to the approval of her opposite number, recruit new members into the Inner Circle herself: a new White tier, separate from but allied to its Black counterpart. She could apply checks and balances to the excesses of Shaw and his followers.

She could share in his power. She could use it to pursue her own dreams.

Ororo was tempted; sorely tempted. But she was well aware of the magnitude of what she was considering. If Shaw wanted her to believe that she could somehow rehabilitate him, turn the Hellfire Club into a force good, then he would be disappointed. She knew him too well for that. He had already admitted to her that he made allies only for what he could get out of them, and discarded them when he was done. But he expected the same treatment in return. He was offering Ororo a chance to play a dangerous game, and in some ways she was still naive about the rules. The cost to herself, if she lost, was potentially huge.

But what if she didn't lose?

Her thoughts were in turmoil. There were so many things she wanted to say, so many questions, but she didn't know where to start. Shaw sat back in his seat again, and watched her with the ghost of a smile on his face. He was confident. Too confident for her liking. He knew that he had hooked her, and she hated being so transparent.

In some ways, then, it was a relief when the door crashed open and a Hellfire Club agent raced into the room.

It was one of the waiters, still dressed in his white dinner jacket, but he now carried one of the lightweight machine-guns that were standard issue for Shaw's uniformed troops. Ororo leapt to her feet, momentarily recalling her earlier suspicions-but she could see from Shaw's expression of barely controlled anger that he had certainly not planned this interruption.

"Sir, sir," panted the agent as he skidded to a halt, "we're under attack!"

With immaculate timing, there came a muffled explosion from one of the upper floors.

“By whom?” asked Shaw, tight-lipped, taking the time to dab at his mouth with a napkin.

“I don’t know, sir. One of our agents on Level Four radioed in a distress message, but he was cut off before he could finish.”

Shaw nodded curtly, stood and laid his napkin aside. Ororo reached for her comm-set and activated it. “Iceman, we have trouble.” “I’ve just heard,” Bobby Drake’s voice crackled in the tiny receiver. “Any idea what we’re up against?”

“Not yet—but whoever they are, they’ve taken out half of Shaw’s agents already.”

Shaw marched out of the room, and Ororo followed him as she continued her conversation. “Where are you?”

“Outside Hank’s quarters. I don’t want to leave him.”

She nodded in approval, although her teammate couldn’t see her. “Stay there.”

The jacketed agent was joined by his two colleagues in the corridor outside. The bizarre trio scampered ahead of their employer protectively, guns at the ready. The Black King himself maintained an unhurried air, but his strides were deceptively long and Ororo found it an effort to keep up with him. “Level Four,” he growled. “They’ve already penetrated deep into the base without us knowing about it. They can only have teleported in.”

Ororo acknowledged the information with a nod. She reached down, took the hem of her red dress in both hands and pulled, creating a tear up the side of her right leg. It seemed a shame—but if she was to go into combat, then she would need absolute freedom of movement. And a part of her also took a childish delight in destroying Shaw’s gift to her.

She reached the foot of the stairs and looked up to see that somebody was crouching in the shadows at the first

corner. The figure had its back to her, but it was wearing the familiar Hellfire Club uniform. The three agents were already hurrying forward, concerned for what was apparently an injured colleague. Storm frowned as she detected something unnatural about the figure's posture. It didn't quite fit into its clothing, and its skin, exposed through tears in the blue cloth, was yellowing and flaking. The faint, musty scent of decay played with her nostrils, and she made to cry out a warning but it was already too late.

The figure whipped around, razor claws extended through the fingers of its red gloves, staring blankly out of a jagged hole in its flesh-toned mask. With one fluid movement, it gutted two of the agents. The third, his white jacket splattered with blood, pumped bullets into its chest, but the creature's lip-less mouth split into a grin as it shrugged off the attack. It lashed out with its claws again, but its would-be victim dodged its swipe and backed away from it. Storm tried to help him, but it was difficult to generate weather patterns in such a confined area. She was forming a heavy cloud above the stairwell, ready to bring down a lightning bolt, when the creature sprang for the last agent's throat. Its weight bore him down the stairs to land at Storm and Shaw's feet, his head lolling at an impossible angle.

Standing astride its third kill, the creature looked up at Storm. Its tongue tumbled out of its mouth and saliva flowed down its chin. With the speed of a striking serpent, Shaw moved in behind it and delivered a chopping blow to the side of its neck. A bone snapped, and the creature's white eyes misted over. A moment later, its legs folded beneath it.

Iceman was shouting over the comm-set, his tinny voice almost swamped by static. "Ororo, it's Selene's demons-and they're wired to explode!"

Storm and Shaw exchanged the briefest of glances before they looked down at the fallen creature in unison. A bulky black belt was tied around its waist-and on the buckle,

a red light had begun to flash insistently. Storm reacted without stopping to think, her X-Men training kicking in. She gathered Shaw up in her arms and summoned air currents to propel them both out of danger. They soared upward, past the next level; they had almost reached the one beyond it when they were engulfed by a tremendous blast from below, almost overcome by a ferocious wave of light and heat and sound. Blown off-course, eyes stinging, Storm struggled to regain her bearings—but there was another explosion above her, and suddenly she was being showered by hot shrapnel. A sharp edge glanced off her forehead and left a shallow gash. Her eyes were watering, and through a veil of tears she saw the opening of a passageway to her left and veered dizzily into it. Her feet hit the ground, followed by her knees. Her passenger tumbled out of her grasp and she collapsed on top of him.

Behind Storm, the staircase crumpled: it sent a thick cloud of dust along the corridor and enveloped her in a white shroud. Her lungs heaved and her throat burned and she fought to resist an old terror, trying not to think about the fact that she was now trapped underground. The floor beneath her hands was shaken by more distant explosions, and she knew now that the demon intruders wanted no less than the total destruction of the Kree base. She could hear a rumbling sound above her head, and the terrible shriek of tortured metal. She rolled over onto her back to see that the ceiling was bulging inward.

“Goddess, no!” she screamed—but she had no time to do anything else but throw up a futile warding hand as the world fell upon her.

CHAPTEI 5

WOLVERINE’S ENHANCED senses were on full alert as he followed Storm, Rogue and Shaw into the grounds of Avengers _Mansion. Manhattan Island may have been quiet, but its sidewalks were stained with old blood—and eveiy so often the scent of a decaying corpse hit him, drifting out

through a broken window or up from beneath the rotting garbage stink of an overflowing dumpster.

He could smell something else too: fear. It permeated the very air of this nightmare future.

The mansion was abandoned, as Phoenix had predicted. Its gates had been wrenched from their hinges, its door hung open and vegetation had gained footholds in its masonry. The front lawn was neat and green, but Wolverine could tell that the grass was fake. Mixed in with the unpleasant, sterile aroma of plastic was the acidic tang of engine oil. He reminded the others that, despite appearances, the Avengers' defenses may yet be active.

They inched their way cautiously along the driveway, gaining confidence when nothing appeared to bar their path: a misplaced confidence, as it transpired.

They were only a dozen steps away from the inviting doorway when the attack came. Wolverine's sensitive ears picked it up first: a deep mechanical rumbling from beneath his feet. His barked warning came just in time for Storm and Rogue to take to the air, avoiding the thick metal coils that erupted from the ground and sought to entangle the quartet. Wolverine popped his claws from the backs of his hands, experience enabling him to ignore the pain as they shredded his skin: it would heal in moments anyway. He twisted and turned, pushing his squat but athletic body to its limit to keep himself out of reach of the grasping tendrils. He tried to cut one, and was disgruntled to see that he only struck sparks from its surface. Like his claws, the coil was constructed from—or at least sheathed in—near-impervious adamantium. He was keeping one step ahead of them—just about—but their attack patterns were designed to drive him away from the building and he couldn't get past them. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Shaw had already been caught.

Then a second threat presented itself: small, square sections of the artificial lawn flipped over to reveal short,

stubby, platform-mounted guns on their undersides. The guns rotated upon their mountings, tracking the two airborne X-Men, and one of them spat a stream of dark energy at Rogue. She had seen the danger, but evidently it had approached faster than she had anticipated. She swerved, barely avoiding the first blast, and flew into a second. The guns had been programmed well. Rogue was winded and in pain-which meant that she had taken what, to anybody not blessed with her tough hide, would have been a fatal hit. Which, in turn, meant that somebody must have refitted the guns since the Avengers' departure from their headquarters.

Wolverine relayed that information to the others, including the team in Central Park, via Phoenix. *Looks like there could be someone here*, he telesent. Cyclops asked if reinforcements were needed, to which he replied: *No need to send in the cavalry yet. We'll keep you posted.*

Storm disposed of two of the guns with well-targeted lightning strikes. Wolverine leapt upon a third: it was adamantium-plated, of course, but he forced his claws into its seams and pried it apart. Its power source exploded in his face, causing minor burns to his skin, but they too would be gone in no more than a few minutes.

The guns were ignoring Shaw, presumably on the grounds that his threat had already been neutralized. Rogue must have seen this too, as she landed and took cover behind him. She was still a little unsteady on her feet, but the gambit worked: hidden from the guns' sensors, and with the nearest coils already occupied with holding the Black King in place, she was able to gain a short breather. As Storm and Wolverine rushed the coils nearest the door together, hoping that they couldn't cope with two attackers at once, Rogue laid a hand upon Shaw's shoulder, spun him around and punched him three times in the face. He was unmoved by the powerful blows, reacting only with a small nod of gratitude. Energized by Rogue's gift of kinetic force,

he flexed his muscles and tore the coils that held him right out of the ground. Relaxing their steely grips, they flopped lifelessly around his feet.

A coil whipped around the hovering Storm's ankle, holding her fast and pulling her down. But her sacrifice allowed Wolverine to reach Avengers Mansion at last.

He dropped to his haunches in the cool, dark hallway of the building, detecting multiple scents in the doorways around him and the staircase above, presenting a smaller target to the unseen watchers. His keen eyes picked out their shapes through the gloom an instant before they rushed him. Their form-fitting two-tone costumes of various colors marked them out as Genoshan mutants: human beings whose latent mutant genes had been artificially stimulated by the corrupt government of their island nation. Once, they had served as a secret army of unpaid, super-powered slaves. Then Magneto had taken control of Genosha—which, to Wolverine's mind, was not much of an improvement but at least its subjects had been freed.

It made sense, he supposed, that Genoshan refugees should have found their way here, given that the Legacy Virus was rife in their own country. These particular mutants, however, still had shaved heads and bore their old numbers upon their chests. Some attempt to reassert their pride, he wondered, by co-opting and subverting the former symbols of their servitude? Or had they simply exchanged one despotic master for another?

He didn't have time to ponder that question. Sympathetic as he felt towards the plight of his attackers, he couldn't afford to pull any punches with them, particularly as their powers were unknown. Rather than stand his ground, he rushed to meet them, fists and claws flailing.

Within seconds, he had been buried beneath a pile of heaving bodies.

Cyclops could see the flickering light of a dying fire through the trees, and he motioned to his three teammates to slow down and approach with caution. Gray smoke curled around the tree trunks and brought with it a deeply unpleasant smell that was familiar from a hundred battles. The smell gave Cyclops an idea of what to expect even before he reached the edge of a small, untended and overgrown meadow and had his awful suspicion confirmed.

Iceman was unable to suppress a gasp of horror. Nightcrawler lowered his eyes and crossed himself, no doubt offering up a silent prayer. Phoenix remained focused upon the matter in hand, and Cyclops heard her voice in his mind: *I can't detect any thought patterns in the vicinity.* She sounded distant, no doubt because she was still concentrating on maintaining the telepathic link between the two X-Men teams. She was probably also monitoring the other team's situation, after Wolverine's warning that they had run into trouble.

They moved out into the open, but still trod softly. It felt right somehow, like a mark of respect for the dead. The stench of burnt flesh was stronger now, and Cyclops almost gagged on it. Iceman curled his lower lip into a snarl and extinguished the fire with an angry burst of watery ice, the consistency of snow. It was far too late, however, for the middle-aged African-American woman who lay suspended above the now-fizzling flames, lashed to a latticework of gnarled and blackened sticks like a wild boar on a spit.

Cyclops's nausea deepened as he recognized the mutilated corpse.

"Her name was Pearl Scott," he said numbly. "Storm and I met her a few days ago at her home in Poughkeepsie. Her husband Clyde was one of the scientists kidnapped by the Hellfire Club." Having made that connection for the others, he didn't need to continue. They already knew how Sebastian Shaw had captured three prominent geneticists and put them to work on finding a cure for the Legacy Virus

in the research facility beneath his Kree island. Even after the X-Men had ostensibly liberated Clyde Scott and his colleagues, the trio had had little choice but to continue their work: they had been infected with Legacy themselves to ensure that it was in their best interests to cooperate.

Cyclops remembered Clyde Scott's ultimate fate, and a dark wave of sadness—tinged with a small amount of guilt—washed over him. "He was one of the people who died when Selene's demons attacked the island." He had promised to get Pearl's husband back for her. He hadn't even had the chance to tell her what had happened to him. From her point of view, Clyde had been killed a year ago and she almost certainly hadn't even been told. She must have gone to her own death with that aching void of uncertainty in her heart.

His gloomy reverie was interrupted by a sound from behind him. The snap of a twig.

It had come from somewhere beyond the tree line. The others had heard it too, and they reacted instantaneously. Nightcrawler teleported away: Cyclops felt him through the link as he materialized in a nearby tree, only to report that he could see nothing even from this new vantage point. Phoenix performed another quick scan of the area, but she shook her head as she came up blank for a second time. If there was indeed somebody there, then he or she was not only invisible to the eye but also to Jean's extra-sensory powers.

Cyclops cast a meaningful glance at Iceman, who knew what to do. He stepped forward and sent a wide-angled flurry of snow ahead of him. Five blank spaces were picked out by the blizzard; five short figures, each no taller than four feet, among the trees. They realized that they had been sighted, and their postures betrayed their alarm. Three of them turned to run, but Nightcrawler appeared behind them in a cloud of brimstone and they recoiled from his demonic form. Scanning the figures, Cyclops saw that one stood a

short way apart from the others, its fingers to its temples, its head bowed in concentration. He targeted it with a low-powered optic blast, no more than enough to shock it.

His hunch was proved right. The figure recoiled, startled, and the cloaking field that it must have been maintaining around itself and its fellows was dropped. The holes in Iceman's snowstorm were abruptly filled in, and Phoenix gasped: "They're children. Just children!"

"That doesn't mean they can't be dangerous," Cyclops reminded her, aware of Pearl Scott's toasted corpse behind him.

The children—three boys and two girls—looked like the archetypal impoverished orphans from a movie adaptation of a Dickens novel. The eldest of them was about ten, the youngest about four. Their faces were grimy, their hair unkempt, and they were dressed in rags. However, as if acting upon some inaudible signal, they sprang at the X-Men in unison. Blue sparks emanated from the clenched fists of one boy; another sprouted protective spines all over his skin. One of the girls was coming right at Cyclops: her short body elongated in midair, her clothes dissolving into a coating of white fur as her forehead receded and her eyes became scarlet. Staring into the salivating jaws of a monster, Cyclops prepared to unleash his eye-beams again. Despite his warning to the others, however, compassion stayed his hand. He simply threw himself out of the way of his attacker—to find that she hadn't been aiming for him at all.

The children scattered, leaving the X-Men in disarray. "Wait!" cried Phoenix. "We don't mean you any harm." Her plea was to no avail.

"I don't think they did it," said Nightcrawler quietly. Cyclops turned to him with a quizzical expression. He was looking at Pearl, and his headlamp eyes were dimmed by sadness. "Those claw marks on her body—none of those kids could have made those. They're too deep even for the lycanthrope."

"They weren't killers," concurred Phoenix. "They were just afraid."

“But they were going to ... to ... if we hadn’t come along_____”

Iceman couldn’t complete the sentence. He turned away and put a hand to his stomach as if he were about to be sick.

“Perhaps they felt they had no choice,” said Phoenix.

There was silence for a long moment as the X-Men considered that chilling statement. Then, finally, Cyclops said: “We should give her a dignified burial. It’s the least we can do.”

“And may God have mercy upon her soul,” added Nightcrawler.

“And the rest of us,” added Iceman under his breath. “And the rest of us.”

Even bound as she was, Storm was able to bring down lightning strikes to dispose of the remaining platform-mounted guns. They pivoted this way and that, unable to discern the origins of the attacks upon them until they had been blown apart. Shaw watched the spectacle, almost dazzled by the flashes of light, his nostrils full of ozone. The display of sheer power was awesome, and his respect for its wielder deepened all the more.

He had allowed the coils to catch him again, at least partly to prevent the more deadly guns from targeting him. He could have absorbed the concussive force of such a blast, of course, but its heat energy was another matter, and he didn’t relish the prospect of being burned. Now that it was safe to do so, he tore himself free once more. He saw that, likewise, Rogue was using her considerable strength to disentangle Storm. Most of the tendrils had been uprooted now: they lay on the artificial grass, sometimes convulsing and throwing off sparks.

Shaw turned his attention to Avengers Mansion itself and to the seething pile of mutants—at least twenty of them—in its hallway. As he watched, the pile erupted, bodies flying

everywhere, and a furious Wolverine emerged from within. Several of the bodies didn't stand up again.

Storm and Rogue joined the battle without hesitation. Shaw followed them, but paused in the doorway of the building and scanned the chaotic scene with calculating eyes. He was beginning to weaken again, having used up much of the energy that Rogue had fed to him. He set his sights upon one particular mutate: a young man dressed in dark blue, a head taller than most of the others, with wide shoulders, a barrel chest and overdeveloped arm muscles. He was lashing out with his fists, repeatedly finding Wolverine too fast for him, and it was a fair bet that his only power was his supernormal strength.

Shaw set out towards him, almost untroubled by the other mutates as they concentrated on defending themselves against the more aggressive X-Men. Only once did a spindly, aged creature leap at him with remarkable dexterity, to be repulsed by a casual but painful jab to her nose from Shaw's elbow.

Shaw reached the muscular mutate, reached up and tapped his shoulder politely. When he turned around, confusion clouding the tiny eyes beneath his low brow, Shaw slapped his face. The mutate's jaw dropped open in abject surprise. Then he frowned, drew back one meaty, gloved fist and returned the gesture with a hundred times its original force.

By the time his knuckles reached their target, they had lost all momentum: they brushed against Shaw's cheek like the merest breath of the wind, and the Black King smiled as he felt the considerable power of the punch flowing into him. He raised his right hand and crooked his fingers, inviting his foe to hit him again. The mutate-like many of the people with whom Shaw had done battle, both physically and in the boardroom-must have been of pitiful intellect, because he did as he was bade. And he kept on punching even when it became clear that his blows were ineffectual,

even as Shaw's smile spread wider, because his limited imagination could come up with no better strategy.

By the time he had absorbed nine punches, there was liquid fire pumping through Sebastian Shaw's veins. The tenth, he blocked with his palm, whereupon he closed his fingers around the mutate's fist and squeezed until he could feel the crunch of breaking bones. He was still smiling, but he pulled back his lips and bared his teeth as the mutate howled and sank to his knees. The wretched boy clamped his free hand around Shaw's wrist and tried in desperation to loosen his grip, but Shaw's strength now exceeded his by far.

When at last he judged that his foe had suffered enough for his presumption in assaulting him, he brought up his knee sharply and made contact with the mutate's head, rendering him unconscious. Then he surveyed the battleground once more to see how his allies were doing.

They had had a long day, stumbling from one fight to another-and unlike Shaw, they couldn't simply recharge. They were also outnumbered, and their foes' abilities were as varied and impressive as their own. Many of the mutates possessed enhanced strength and stamina, and some were incredibly fast or agile. At least two of them could deliver explosive bursts from their fingertips, while another appeared to generate electricity and conduct it by touch. One yellow-clad young woman could blow herself up and reassemble her molecules in a matter of seconds, and another spat a glistening poison, her neck swelling up like that of a puff adder as she collected each deadly payload therein.

The X-Men, nevertheless, were not easy to defeat. Rogue shrugged off countless blows with casual ease, while her own punches in turn proved devastatingly effective. The mutates could hardly lay a hand on Wolverine as he threaded his way between them, his lightning reflexes keeping him ahead of any attack as his claws struck out

with surgical precision. Shaw's gaze lingered longest on Storm: her powers were little use to her in close quarters, but she was more than holding her own. She had been trained in hand-to-hand combat by the best, of course, but she also possessed remarkable discipline, a complete self-awareness and focus that Shaw admired. He could see it in her confident but controlled actions—and he could also feel it in the back of his mind thanks to Phoenix's psychic link.

He felt something else too: a warning from Rogue, unvoiced but plain in her thoughts. Caught unawares, he reacted almost too late. He pivoted to his right and ducked as an energy beam fizzled and crackled above his head. It was black—so black that it seemed to leech the colors from the world around it—and he felt a wave of intense cold as it passed. Only now did he see that Rogue was grappling with a dark-skinned mutate. The same black energy coruscated around his eyes, but the X-Man had her arm around his throat and she had pulled back his hairless head, causing him to aim high. “Best save the daydreams for later, sugar,” she called out loud to Shaw in her Southern drawl, a grim smile on her face.

Shaw narrowed his eyes, annoyed by the implied criticism—and all the more so because it had been justified. Whenever he had fought alongside others in the past, it had been a case of “every man for himself.” His primary concern had been his own safety, because he had known that nobody else would think to preserve it for him. He was still getting used to the fact that, with the X-Men, things were different. He was still getting used to trusting them.

In assisting Shaw, Rogue had left herself exposed: she was still wrestling with his erstwhile attacker when three more mutates rushed her from behind. Shaw took a powerful leap and intercepted the trio, a swipe of his left arm sending the first of them soaring above the heads of the crowd. The others charged and he braced himself, although it was hardly necessary. They rebounded from him,

and he picked them up from the floor and knocked their heads together. At the same time, he put an earlier observation to use, directing a telepathic message at Wolverine: *Female mutate at ten o'clock. She's about to spit venom in three... two ... one...*

Wolverine didn't acknowledge the information, but he seized a particularly bulky mutate and pushed him into the adder-woman's path at the very moment that she discharged her poison. He cried out in pain, falling to his knees and clawing at his face. As the woman's neck began to swell again, Wolverine turned his attention to her and brought her down with a swift chop to the back of her knees.

Shaw had always exulted in the rush of combat, the cathartic release of his mutant energies. He often-not always, but often-denied himself that pleasure, knowing that true, lasting victories were gained by stealth, with prudent deals and secret handshakes in locked rooms. But he had rarely enjoyed a battle as much as this. He fought alongside Storm, knowing without having to ask that she would watch his back, doing the same for her in return. As the odds against them lessened, he felt a great thrill of achievement. He knew that as part of a team, he was accomplishing far more than he had ever been capable of on his own.

The tide turned against them in an instant.

Wolverine sensed the new arrival, but not in time to act. All Shaw got was a vague telepathic sensation of something big and gunmetal blue at the top of the stairs. He whirled around as twin rockets whooshed towards him, blazing trails of fire. He resisted the urge to try to dodge them, realizing that they would pass to each side of him. They embedded themselves in the floor and exploded. Shaw gritted his teeth as he was caught in the center of a maelstrom of fire and falling masonry. Bricks and beams bounced harmlessly off him to collect in a pile at his feet, but his boiler suit was shredded and dust stung his eyes and tore at the back of his

throat. He weathered the onslaught, aware of Wolverine and Rogue falling and of Storm's desperate prayer that she would not be buried again. He heard the screams and dying gargles of the mutants, and knew that whoever had launched this attack had cared nothing for their safety, had desired nothing more nor less than total destruction.

He had closed his eyes to protect them, but he looked up as he heard a whine of servo-motors from above him. The lower half of the staircase had collapsed, but a huge armored figure simply jumped the gap. It passed through a newly created shaft of daylight before landing heavily and compacting a pile of debris, sending up another white dust cloud.

Standing untouched in the ruins of the Avengers' hallway, surrounded by the injured and the dying, Shaw found himself looking into the face of his opponent. He was not at all surprised to see that it was the face of a one-time ally. When last he had seen Trevor Fitzroy, the young mutant had held the rank of White Rook in the Hong Kong Inner Circle. One look at his malicious, mad-eyed expression told Shaw that he felt no loyalty toward his Black King now.

Not that this was any great loss. Fitzroy had never displayed much potential, least of all intellectually. Shaw had put up with his arrogance and occasional petulance only because his origins had made him vaguely useful. The self-styled Technomancer hailed from a distant future: he had fled to the present day using his mutant ability to open portals through time and space. His bio-armor, which increased the bulk of his wiry form tenfold, came from that future too. It was presently configured for maximum offence, bristling with weaponry. The rocket launchers on its shoulders still smoldered, and five red-tinted, multi-jointed claws protruded from its right gauntlet, each of them as long as a man's arm. Fitzroy's exposed head, with its long hair and short beard dyed green, looked faintly ridiculous, dwarfed as it was by the metal suit from which it protruded.

But Shaw knew better than to underestimate the technology at his disposal.

Outwardly, he betrayed no sign of worry: he was far too skilled in the art of bluffing. In his mind, however, he formed a telepathic message to the rest of the X-Men. *I think*, he told them calmly, *we would appreciate that offer of assistance now.*

"I don't think that will be necessary," said a woman's voice.

Shaw raised an eyebrow in surprise as Fitzroy's expression went blank and his eyes rolled back into his head. He sidestepped neatly as the enormous suit of armor toppled towards him like a marionette with its strings cut: even with its kinetic force stolen, its weight would have crushed him. However, it never hit the floor. The air was rent around Fitzroy, screeching as it formed a flat circle of roiling energy into which he plummeted. As soon as he was out of sight, the gateway shut again, leaving only a dead silence in its wake.

It was broken by the slightest of sounds: the skittering of stones as Rogue shifted and began to pull herself out from beneath the rubble. It didn't occur to Shaw to help her.

He was staring at the new arrival: the woman who had spared him from a potentially unfortunate encounter. He had recognized her voice, of course, as soon as he had heard it. The fact that she had tapped into his telepathic conversation and responded to his thoughts had been another clue. But her appearance had changed so much.

She stepped into the light now, and Shaw could see her properly. Her face was older than he remembered: it hadn't just aged a year, it had become more lined and careworn. It was framed by her black hair, which she had let down. Most surprising of all, though, was her costume: she dressed in figure-hugging black leather, with one shoulder exposed. And around her waist she wore a red belt, the buckle of which displayed a familiar "X" logo.

“Hello Sebastian,” said Tessa with a cool half-smile.
“Welcome back.”

Nightcrawler was the first of the reinforcements to reach Avengers Mansion. As Cyclops, Phoenix and Iceman hurried across Central Park back to Fifth Avenue, he simply concentrated on Sebastian Shaw’s thoughts until he had formed a clear picture of his surroundings. That picture enabled him to teleport directly to the scene.

There was no disguising the noise and smell of his arrival. However, he materialized in the shadows at the top of the ruined staircase and clung to the wall with his adhesive toes, hoping to give himself time to take in the situation before his position could be pinpointed.

Rogue had already emerged from the wreckage and was giving Storm a hand to do likewise. Some of the mutants were standing too, but their appetites for violence had been quenched and most of them scampered or limped away while they could. Shaw himself seemed blind to the activity around him. He was staring suspiciously at a black-clad young woman, who looked back at him with wide, guileless eyes. It took Nightcrawler a moment to recognize the Black King’s one-time personal assistant.

“You can show yourself, Mr. Wagner,” said Tessa. “There is no danger.”

Nightcrawler moved warily into the light. Tessa had long been an inscrutable foe of the X-Men, her telepathic ability complementing her computer-like mind. However, she had also been fiercely loyal to her master. Perhaps she was telling the truth.

He leapt forward, somersaulting to a graceful landing in the hallway between her and Shaw. “Then what happened here?”

“Fitzroy happened!” The snarled answer came from Wolverine, who was struggling to rise from beneath a heavy beam. Nightcrawler would have helped him, but his proud

friend wouldn't have thanked him for it. Glowering at Shaw, Wolverine spat: "You pick some pretty lousy friends."

Tessa smiled. "He always did as I recall. But Trevor Fitzroy plays for Selene's team now."

"He has joined her Inner Circle?" asked Storm, brushing brick dust from her cloak.

"As its Black Rook," confirmed Tessa.

Shaw hadn't taken his eyes off her. "You shut down his mind," he said evenly.

"His bio-armor was in full attack configuration. He should have settled for a few less guns and kept the psi shielding up and running. Taken by surprise, he made an easy mark."

"Where is he now?" asked Nightcrawler.

"Teleported away. He's made improvements to that metal suit since you last met him. In an emergency, it taps into his own mutant power and opens a gateway for him back home to the Hellfire Club. It makes him difficult to remove from the board."

"We're beginning to realize that a lot has changed in our absence," sighed Storm.

"But you seem none too surprised to find us here," said Rogue.

"We've been expecting you," said Tessa.

"We?" repeated Shaw sharply, his gaze rooted to the "X" symbol on her belt.

"Times change," she shrugged, "and needs must. I go by the code name of Sage now."

"Indeed?" murmured Shaw.

"Where are the other three?" asked Sage. "Cyclops, Phoenix and Iceman."

"On their way," said Nightcrawler, wondering just how much she knew.

Sage acknowledged the information with a nod. "We need to leave this building before Fitzroy recovers and returns with more mutants, or with Hellfire Club demons." She was already making for the door. "Tell your friends to

meet us at the corner of 49th Street and Sixth Avenue. I'll take you all to meet my group."

Do you trust her? Phoenix's telepathic message was meant for her husband only.

I don't know, responded Cyclops. *I get the feeling that even Shaw isn't sure.*

They had rendezvoused with the others as planned. Ever since then, Tessa—or Sage, as Cyclops supposed he ought to call her now—had been leading them through the near-deserted city. They were heading broadly south along Sixth Avenue, but their guide diverted them off the main road wherever possible, leading them down narrow alleyways and through neglected yards.

That's because she's wearing our colors, Phoenix pointed out.

An attempt to gain our trust at the expense of his? mused Cyclops. Shaw had stayed close to Sage throughout the journey, but the pair had exchanged no words. Looking at the Black King now, Scott couldn't help but think how vulnerable he looked, his green tunic torn at last, all but shredded so that his bare chest was exposed. *I'm not sure that would be logical.*

And if there's one thing we know about Tessa, it's that she's always logical.

I don't think we have a choice, he concluded. *We have to trust her. Look at us—we need a place to rest before we collapse from sheer exhaustion. And we need to take stock.*

Phoenix let out the mental equivalent of a sigh. *I'm not sure I even want to think about everything that's happened. To have lost all that time, Scott, to have let Selene do all this . . . and our friends.... Hank, and who knows how many more...*

We can't afford to dwell on regrets, Jean. We can only deal with the situation as it stands.

It's just that it all happened so fast... we haven't even had time to think about what Blackheart did to us, what he showed us.

Cyclops shivered at the reminder. *Now that's something we should forget. None of that was real, Jean. If we start to believe otherwise, then Blackheart has won. If you want to take something from it, then take this: we mustn't ever compromise our ethics, no matter the temptation, no matter the cause.*

You're thinking about Hank, aren't you? You think he did the wrong thing, choosing to work with Shaw and the Hellfire Club.

I know he did it for the right reasons, thought Cyclops grimly, I know he thought it was better to have a cure to the Legacy Virus exist in the hands of somebody like Shaw than to have no cure at all. But look around you, Jean. Look at what Selene did with that cure!

None of this was Hank's fault, Phoenix protested. He couldn't have foreseen Selene's involvement. That cure was meant to save the world. A hint of bitterness had entered her internal voice. So many people worked so hard to achieve something good, something worthwhile, and it only took one—just one—to take that work, that hope, and to twist it into something evil. It makes me wonder if we aren't pursuing an impossible dream after all.

Impossible, maybe, returned Cyclops, but I still think it's a dream worth fighting for.

Two figures stood atop a Sixth Avenue skyscraper.

Up here among the rooftops of New York, the world was white, dominated by the shifting energies of the Black Queen's mystical force field. That field, however, provided no protection from an icy Winter wind, although the two figures were hardly aware of the cold. Their gazes were fixed upon the X-Men and their allies as they wended their way through the concrete canyons below them. They were a long way down; far enough that even Wolverine could not

have caught scent of their secret observers. To normal eyes, they would have resembled nothing more than a procession of unusually colorful ants. These watchers, however, could make out every detail in their expressions, see every tear in their costumes and read every word on their lips.

“Seven X-Men in all,” said the female observer in a voice devoid of emotion, “accompanied by Shaw and the rebel known as Sage.” “So Fitzroy defeated none of them.” The man’s voice was deeper, tinged with menace. It also betrayed a grim satisfaction at the failure of his colleague. “Perhaps now Selene will see the folly of inviting that young upstart into our Circle.”

“Fitzroy is impatient,” said the woman. “That has ever been his downfall.”

“Whereas we, my dear,” said the man, “have finally tracked our foes to their lair.”

On the street below, Sage was ushering her comrades into an abandoned subway station. They hurried down the stone steps in single file, glancing furtively around them but failing to notice two dark specks four blocks to their north and eighty stories above them.

“The Black Rook falls,” said the woman, her voice remaining as cold as ever, “but the Black Bishops move in for the kill.”



CHAPTER 6

THE BEAST was only dimly aware of the sounds of destruction at first. He could hear explosions, but they seemed a long way dis—

tant. But the sounds became louder and closer until he couldn't

ignore them any more. He surfaced from sleep, already throwing the covers from his bed as he swung his oversized feet to the floor. He was acting without conscious thought, his years of training kicking in and taking over his body, reacting to the first sign of danger. He had already yanked open the door of the dormitory when his brain caught up with his actions, his memories falling into place in a way that was becoming depressingly familiar.

The Hellfire Club. The Kree island. The Legacy Virus. The radiation treatments.

And now, his teammate Iceman stumbled backwards into him, hands raised as he struggled to fight off a seeming horde of demons with his ice-generating powers.

"Oh, my stars and garters!" exclaimed the Beast. Instinctively he leapt away, rolling into an alert squatting position in one corner of the room, ready to defend himself as he took stock of the situation. The demons were wearing Hellfire Club uniforms, which presumably made them agents of Selene. They crowded into the doorway after Iceman, fighting each other to be the first through but flinching from a bombardment of dart-shaped hailstones.

And that was when the side-effects of Hank's treatment crashed back in upon him. His display of athleticism had been a mistake. His stomach cramped and he was almost overcome by a dizzying rush to his head. He had been balancing on the balls of his toes, but he rocked back onto his heels and almost fell over. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, and heard Iceman's frantic voice: "Hank, you've got to get out of here!"

"Gladly," he responded tartly, knowing that the room had only one door. "And what manner of egress did you have in mind, pray?"

"The demons have bombs, but they aren't using them around here." Iceman tried to seal the doorway, but his

attackers smashed through his ice barrier before it could harden. “They’ve been doing their best to get into this room. They want you, Hank.” Three demons closed in upon him, their claws raised, forcing him to fall back again. He made a circular ice shield for himself and used it to fend off their blows.

A fourth demon set its eyes upon the Beast, and an expression of malicious glee lit its crack-skinned features. With an unearthly howl, it pounced upon him. He couldn’t get out of its way—he didn’t trust his weakened body not to betray him—so he blocked its lunge with the room’s only chair, which splintered into pieces.

It took him a moment to deduce what Selene might want from him. His illness, he chided himself, must have slowed down his brain as well as his body. She wanted the blood that flowed through his veins: the blood that might yet prove to contain the precious cure to the Legacy Virus. But if he was taken from the Kree base now, if he was denied further radiation treatments, then the prognosis for his recovery was not at all hopeful.

Another explosion, much closer than the others, shook the room around him. His skin flushed cold as he realized that it had come from the direction of the laboratory.

Iceman had fallen. Without his conscious mind to regulate its temperature, his body armor was beginning to seep into the floor. The demons—about a dozen of them in all—crowded into the small room, and the Beast found himself backed up against the far wall, wielding a broken chair leg like a sword. To his surprise, the oncoming creatures hesitated as if waiting to see what he would do.

He summoned up all his remaining strength, threw the stick as a diversion and took a prodigious standing leap. He bounced off two heads, leapt over another six, handed off two more, performed a double somersault and landed behind the demons, the unguarded door in his sights. For an instant, hope soared in his heart—but then, as he had feared,

he was engulfed by another wave of nausea. Stars exploded in front of his eyes and his legs almost buckled. He reeled, and suddenly the demons were upon him, clawing and biting as they bore him down to the floor.

A fresh emotion surged through him. He had been so close to curing the Legacy Virus at last, to saving countless lives, and now these monsters-and the bigger monster who had sent them-were taking that from him, from the world. The Beast was angry, and that anger lent him strength. Temporarily powered by adrenaline, he let out a primal scream, lashed out with his fists and feet and scored a series of palpable hits. For a minute or more, the demons couldn't lay a hand upon him. They were in disarray, struggling to restrain their foe but falling over each other, being tossed about like leaves in a hurricane.

It couldn't last. The Beast was overwhelmed by a combination of force of numbers and exhaustion. His arms became heavier until they felt impossible to lift, and his eyes lost focus until he couldn't see where he was aiming his blows anyway. His anger drained away until it was only a small voice inside him railing against the injustice of Fate.

And the world turned black around him, and stayed that way for a long time.

Moira MacTaggert heard the explosion as she was straining to push a lab bench—a huge block of solid metal—across the laboratory. She dropped behind it for protection as the large double doors strained inward-but thankfully, the heavy bolts held. To the naked eye, the doors appeared to be constructed from the same dull gray metal as the rest of the alien base, but it made sense that they would have been reinforced somehow.

The blast had deadened her ears, and she didn't hear Rory Campbell hobbling up behind her. She started as he spoke to her. "I've got the cover off the ventilation duct!" he shouted, obviously suffering from temporary deafness

himself. He jerked his head toward the small annex in which he had been working. "I suggest we get out of here!"

Moira shook her head. "Not yet. Not while we can still slow yon beasties down at least!" She glanced across the room to where a ribbon of paper was being churned out of a narrow horizontal slit in the wall. At the first sign of the demon attack, she had instructed the Kree computer to print out the contents of its genetics database. But there was too much information and not nearly enough time. "Come on," she said, leaping back to her feet, "help me get this bench up against those doors."

"This is madness!" protested Campbell, but he did as he was told. He had lived and worked with Moira once, before his defection to the Hellfire Club, and he knew that it was rarely worth the effort of arguing with her. "You see what their bombs did downstairs. How long will this delay them—a few seconds?"

"Right now," said Moira grimly, "I'll take all the seconds we can get. We've worked too long and hard on this cure, made too many sacrifices, to let it be destroyed now."

The lab bench scraped and squealed reluctantly across the metal floor. Moira's leg muscles ached with the effort of pushing it, and her shoulder felt numb. She gasped with relief as it slid into place at last, but there was no time to relax. She had hoped that the demons would have withdrawn after placing their explosives—or that they might have collapsed the corridor outside, blocking their route to the laboratory altogether—but they were already skittering and scratching about on the other side of the doors again.

The two geneticists had barely had time to push a second bench up against the first when they heard the sound of footsteps pattering away. They were prepared, then—crouched behind the benches, fingers in their ears—when the next explosion came. This time, both doors were blown off their hinges; they buckled, but the benches held them in place. The eager demons returned within seconds,

and twisted claws pried their way between doors and frame. Moira and Campbell pushed against the benches with all their might, but they were fighting a losing battle. Slowly but inexorably, they were forced to give way.

Abandoning the unequal struggle, Moira shed her white lab coat to reveal a yellow and black bodysuit. The contrast summed up the dichotomy of her life: as a physician she was trained to heal, but her public association with mutants meant that she often had to fight instead. Resigned to this fact, she had trained with the X-Men to ensure that she could at least hold her own in combat.

She looked for a weapon, and found a curved metal bar on the floor. She didn't know where it had come from—it was just part of the general clutter; for all she knew, it could have been a delicate component of an advanced Kree machine—but it would suit her purpose.

“Get out of here, Roiy!” she yelled as the first demon squeezed itself through the widened gap between the doorway and the erstwhile barrier. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that Campbell was hesitating. Turning on him, she physically propelled him into the annex. “I’m not being noble, you idiot, I’ll be right behind you. But you’re the slowest, so you get to go first. Go! I’ll hold them off as long as I can.”

Easier said than done, she thought wilyly as Campbell accepted her point and left as quickly as his artificial leg would allow. Demons were pouring into the room now; she was only still alive because they were keener to destroy her work than they were to kill her. They were plucking explosive devices from the belts of their Hellfire Club uniforms, scattering them to every corner. Remembering her incomplete printout, Moira ran to it and snatched it from its slot—but even as she tried to fold it into a manageable bundle, a demon leapt at her. She dropped the paper and wielded her bar, delivering a good crack to the fiend’s head.

But its companions were beginning to turn their attentions to her.

Stubborn as she was, Moira MacTaggert had the sense to know when discretion was the better part of valor. She backed into the annex, swinging her weapon in front of her to discourage pursuit. Campbell had already got clear, and a ventilator duct lay open at ground level. She threw the metal bar at the nearest demon and hurled herself into the aperture.

She found herself in a cramped, square metal pipe; she could feel claws scrabbling at her feet, trying to hold her back, and she kicked out at them in desperation. Something whimpered, and suddenly she was free. She crawled as fast as she could, bumping her knees and elbows but not daring to slow down because she couldn't tell if she was being followed. Even as she reached an intersection, she had no choice but to trust to blind luck, to choose a direction at random and pray that it would lead her out of the base.

The pipe trembled and a fierce wave of heat rolled over Moira as the bombs in the laboratory behind her were detonated.

Storm's eyes were closed, as much to keep herself from seeing the horrors around her as to protect them from the dust that pried its way into her nose and mouth. Still, she couldn't help but picture the tons of debris that must have fallen upon her. She couldn't help but think about her childhood home in Cairo, of how quickly it had become a tomb, and of the hours she had spent buried therein, unseen by the over-stretched rescue teams.

As she fought to calm herself, a hopeful voice inside her pointed out that she hadn't actually *felt* anything hit her. She was held down nonetheless by something heavy pressed against her body. She was trapped. But the weight, she was surprised to realize, was not cold like stone or metal, it was warm and soft. It shifted in time to the sound

of deep breaths that she had thought her own, and to the exhalations of hot air upon her cheek.

Her eyes snapped open, and she gasped to see Sebastian Shaw's face an inch above hers. His palms lay flat to each side of her head,

his body braced by rigid forearms. His smoking jacket and his hair were almost white, and his features had lost their habitual smugness. "I'm glad to see you're still with us," he said with a grim smile. "You protected me?" croaked Storm hopefully, remembering his powers.

"From the force of the fall-in, yes," said Shaw, "but I am bearing a considerable weight upon my back, and my borrowed energy is draining fast." His smile had become pained and, squinting through the darkness, Storm saw beads of sweat upon his forehead.

"How long can you keep going?" she asked, dreading the answer. "Twenty minutes, perhaps."

She slapped him across the face, but it was a feeble blow. Lying on her back like this, with debris piled up around her, she couldn't manage any better. "I'm afraid," said Shaw, "it will take a great deal more kinetic force than that to keep my cells charged."

"Every little," said Storm hoarsely, "may prolong our lives by precious seconds." She hit him again-and then a third time, using both hands but grunting with the effort.

"My dear Miss Munroe," smiled Shaw, "if I didn't know any better, I would swear you are enjoying this opportunity to assault me." "What do you expect?" she retorted. "You have been playing games with me ever since I arrived on this island." As she spoke, Storm reached out with her inner self, finding pockets of air and drawing them towards her, teasing them through hairline cracks in the rubble. A shortage of oxygen could only make Shaw's task more difficult. She focused upon him, turning her fear into anger, giving herself no time to think about anything else. She set about his arms and shoulders with short, petulant child

punches. "If you had not lured me down to the lowest level of your stolen base, we would never have found ourselves in this situation."

She had managed to whip up a slight breeze, and Shaw's expression softened appreciatively as it caressed his brow. "We have both survived far direr perils than this," he reminded her.

"You sound very confident."

"We have resourceful associates."

"Most of the X-Men are a long way away."

"I am assured that a rescue team is on its way."

"By Tessa?" deduced Storm. Only Shaw's telepathic personal assistant could have contacted him without her knowing it. "You trust her, don't you?"

"Implicitly—and that makes her uniquely special to me."

Ororo frowned. Her questing senses had found the base's stairwell, which, to judge by its air currents, was still largely open. She tried to summon some of that relatively fresh air to her, but it felt damp and heavy. A terrible fear struck her—and a moment later, her ears confirmed it as the truth. "Goddess!" she whispered.

"I wondered when you would hear it," said Shaw. The lines around his eyes had deepened and, with his dust-white hair, he suddenly looked like a much older man.

"The base is flooding!" Storm's voice was little more than a squeak. She was beginning to hyperventilate. *Don't think about it!* She gritted her teeth and pummeled Shaw with renewed zeal, as if hoping to make him strong enough to smash a tunnel out of here with his bare fists.

"You must try to relax," he said in a calm but forceful tone. "We can do nothing about the rising waters, but we don't need to exhaust our air supply faster than you can replenish it."

"A week ago," said Storm, still breathing heavily, "you had your Black Rook, Madelyne Piyor, delve into my thoughts and use my claustrophobia against me. Now you

presume to advise me on how I should cope with my weakness? I don't know how to react to you, Shaw—and that is becoming a familiar dilemma.”

“Believe me, Ororo,” he insisted, “we are not going to die here.” His dark eyes glistened as he added: “And once we are freed, I will expect an answer to my proposal.”

Bobby Drake slept soundly, his subconscious mind swathing him in protective dreams of his boyhood home back on Long Island with his parents. A small part of him was aware of a woman's voice telling him to wake up, but he refused to acknowledge it.

The voice became more insistent, almost painful, and Bobby realized that he couldn't shut it out because it was already inside his head. Jean Grey wandered into his dream in her Phoenix guise with her radiant smile, but hers was not the telepathic presence he had sensed.

He sat up with a start, crying out as he registered the sight of a woman clad in black leather standing over him and thought of Selene. He threw up his hands and reinforced his half-melted ice armor with a thought, although the effort sent a shard of pain into his skull.

“We have no time to waste,” said the woman. “I have need of your powers.”

Iceman finally recognized Shaw's lapdog, Tessa. She was dressed in full Hellfire Club regalia: a black leather teddy, boots up to her upper thighs and a red-trimmed cloak secured at her left shoulder by a trident-embossed clasp. The look was unusual for her, at least in public: he was used to thinking of her as a demure young woman, a silent pen pusher, but now she looked like a Black Queen in waiting. He suppressed a shiver.

“How long have I been out?” he asked, still feeling dizzy.

“Long enough,” she said pointedly.

Iceman's eyes widened as he realized that the room around him was a mess, the bed upended, and he

remembered the battle that had been fought here. "Hank!" he cried.

"Selene has him," said Tessa. "There's nothing you can do for him right now. Your other teammate, however, will not survive much longer without your assistance."

"Storm's in trouble? Well, why didn't you say so?" That was just the wake-up call he had needed. Iceman shrugged off his grogginess and clambered to his feet, although he was a little unsteady and Tessa had to take his arm and guide him out into the corridor.

An embarrassing memory came to him unbidden, and he hoped that it was just a fragment of his fading dream. Or had he really mumbled "Just a few minutes more, mom," to the loyal confidante of one of the X-Men's greatest enemies?

"Yes," said Tessa without a trace of humor, "I'm afraid you did."

She led him to the stairwell, or rather to the gap where the stairwell had once been. Hellfire Club agents-human agents, he was relieved to note-were busy tying ropes to a wheel-mounted gun that looked like a cross between a cannon and a giant laser weapon from an old science-fiction B-movie. Iceman stared into a dark pit, frowning as a dim light spilled out of the corridor behind him and glinted off a rectangle of water.

"It's rising," he said, suspecting that the observation was unnecessary.

"That's why we need you," said Tessa. "You have to stop it. Freeze it."

"It won't be easy," he told her. "You can't just hold back the full force of an ocean."

"Two lives depend upon your being able to find a way, and quickly."

Iceman was already lowering the water's surface temperature. "Two?" he queried.

"Your friend is trapped on Level Nine along with Shaw."

“Uh-huh.” He nodded to himself. Now that he had gleaned Tessa’s true motive for helping the X-Men, life made just a little bit more sense. “And you’re worried about Storm, right?”

“In fifty-four seconds,” she said coldly, “it will become an academic point.”

Iceman’s throat went dry as he saw that the black water was lapping at the lower edge of a blocked corridor opening. “That’s Level Nine?” He didn’t wait for an answer. The water wouldn’t stop rising until it had equalized its level with that of the ocean without. To stop it, he would have to hold back thousands of gallons, defying immense pressure. His lower lip protruded stubbornly as he concentrated, pushing himself to his limit. He was able to freeze a thin surface layer, but it cracked and shattered as the water pushed up from beneath it. It had begun to sluice down the Level Nine corridor now: the torrent found its own way through the wreckage, carrying lumps of ice in its flow. Bobby imagined the claustrophobic Storm, trapped and helpless as the frigid liquid began to pool around her.

He dropped his ice shell, diverting all his resources to his arduous task. He started to sweat as his mutant gene abandoned the unconscious chore of regulating his body temperature. He reached deeper into the water, drawing all the heat he could from its molecules. His own body was dehydrating with the effort, and his head was pounding. Soon, all he could feel—all he could sense—was the pain, and he couldn’t tell if he was even having an effect any more.

He wasn’t consciously aware of the moment when he was forced to surrender. As the world came back into focus, Iceman found himself doubled over, leaning on a wall for support, his lungs heaving. Bereft of his armor, he was clad only in a pair of black trunks into which was sewn a red “X” logo. Normally he didn’t feel the cold, but now the beads of

perspiration that rolled down his exposed skin felt like jagged ice shards.

At first he was only vaguely aware that Tessa had clicked her fingers and gestured toward the Hellfire Club agents. Then he realized that they had wheeled the laser-weapon-cum-cannon out over the edge of the precipice. They had taken the strain of the ropes that held it, and they were lowering it slowly but shakily into the pit.

"Hold on a minute!" he protested weakly. "I'm not sure if the ice is strong enough to take the weight of that thing." The truth was, he had no idea how much water he had succeeded in freezing; he was just relieved that, for the moment at least, it had apparently ceased to rise.

"It will have to be," said Tessa in a tone that brooked no objection. "My employer and your friend cannot have much time left. We must blast our way through to them."

The weapon landed clumsily, and a sharp crack echoed up the erstwhile stairwell. Iceman winced and took a deep breath, steeling himself. He could feel his frozen barrier losing its integrity, returning to liquid form. He fought to maintain it, to repair the cracks, as two Hellfire Club agents dropped the end of a rope ladder into the pit and scrambled down it.

A minute later, he winced as their weapon blasted fire at the obstructed corridor, bucking on its stand and sending fierce vibrations through his head.

Cyclops hadn't garnered much information from Iceman's hurried distress call. However, the X-Men had been on standby ever since they had left three of their own-not to mention a good friend-with Sebastian Shaw and the Hellfire Club. They had expected trouble. Their Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird stealth jet, modified with alien technology, made short work of the long journey to China and beyond, but Cyclops still fretted and wished he had stationed reinforcements closer to the Kree island.

Four of the Blackbird's occupants bailed out as the island came into view. Wolverine rode on Rogue's back, his keen eyesight locating their destination even in the dark. Phoenix used her telekinesis to lower herself and her husband. Nightcrawler stayed at the controls: he would teleport to join the others once he had put the plane down.

Cyclops and Phoenix made a gentle touchdown in the forest clearing that housed the raised entrance to the underground Kree base. Rogue and Wolverine had already landed and rushed inside. Cyclops took in the situation at a glance: smoke was drifting up the metal steps to dissipate on the night air, and Hellfire agents were coughing up bile and nursing fallen comrades. Doctors Moira MacTaggart and Rory Campbell were present: they were trying to help the injured, but they could do little more than wrap their wounds in scraps of clothing and offer words of comfort.

"Thank goodness you're here," said Moira, pale and breathless. "Half the base has collapsed. They've pulled a dozen bodies out of the wreckage-Shaw's goons, mostly-but there are still people down there. We were lucky to get out ourselves."

Cyclops nodded and opened his mouth to ask about his missing teammates. But the question was answered, at least in part, as a group of eight uniformed agents staggered out into the clearing, led by Tessa. Two of them carried a barely conscious Bobby Drake between them. Bringing up the rear of the procession, bedraggled and weary, their arms around each other's shoulders for mutual support, were Shaw and Storm.

"What happened?" asked Cyclops. "Where's Hank?"

Storm shook her head; it was clearly an effort for her to speak. "Taken," she rasped.

"By whom?"

The answer came from Shaw. "Selene," he said grimly.

Cyclops scowled. "If this is a trick..."

“Selene and I may have been allies once,” said Shaw, “but evidently no longer.”

Cyclops chose to accept his word for that, at least for the present. There was no more time for talking; despite the Beast’s predicament, the rescue effort here had to take priority.

Under his direction, working as a team, the X-Men speeded up the process considerably. Phoenix probed the ruins for thought patterns, and Cyclops’s optic blast pulverized the more difficult obstructions. This allowed Rogue and Wolverine to get in closer to the few survivors, whereupon they bent their combined strength to the delicate task of digging them free. Meanwhile, Nightcrawler’s teleportation and his ability to cling to any surface enabled him to reach places that the others, for all their raw power, could not.

Some people, however, were already beyond help.

It did not seem to concern Shaw overmuch that he had lost nineteen of his men in the attack. To him, Cyclops supposed, they were nothing more than resources, a number at the end of a column, hired mercenaries who could be replaced with a telephone call. Moira, on the other hand, was wounded by the deaths of two of her fellow scientists, crushed beneath a falling ceiling as they had fled their quarters. She had only known Professor Travers and Doctor Scott for a week, but she mourned their loss all the same.

And there was something else.

“They didn’t just destroy our work,” said Rory Campbell dispiritedly as the tired X-Men rested in the clearing, enjoying a fine, refreshing watery mist that Storm had conjured up. Ororo herself was slumped against a tree, her eyes closed, breathing deeply. “They trashed all the equipment we’d need to ever have a hope of duplicating it.”

“That’s not to mention the small fact that they killed two of our colleagues,” said Moira bitterly, “and took Hank, who

understood what we were doing here better than any of us.”

“There’s no chance of salvaging anything?” asked Cyclops glumly.

“Och, you saw what it was like down there, Scott-and those demons deliberately targeted the laboratory. Selene wanted this project well and truly terminated.”

“But your serum,” said Phoenix, “it’s still in Hank’s bloodstream, isn’t it?”

“Not the serum itself, not any more. But the supercell it created: aye, that’s in there right enough. And maybe-just maybe, mind-Hank’s had enough radiation treatments to give it the strength it needs to have a fighting chance against this damned virus.”

“Either way,” sighed Campbell, “win or lose, the supercell itself will be destroyed in the fight. If you want to rescue it as well as the Beast, you don’t have much time.”

“How long?” asked Cyclops.

Campbell shrugged and looked at Moira, who was equally uncertain. “It’s impossible to say-but I wouldn’t like to lay odds on it lasting much more than another twelve hours.”

“Then our course of action is plain.” Cyclops hadn’t noticed Shaw sidling up behind him; he wondered how long the Black King had been standing there, listening. “Tessa and my agents can deal with the situation here. We must retrieve the Beast from Selene’s clutches.”

“You make it sound like you’ll be coming with us,” said Rogue in an unkind tone.

“That is indeed my intention.”

“Not a chance, Shaw,” snarled Wolverine, his hackles rising.

“I think you will find,” said Shaw, “that I know both my former Black Queen and the building she currently occupies better than any man alive.”

“You mean the New York Hellfire Club?” asked Rogue.

“Who’s to say she’s taken the Beast back there? She must know it’s the first place we’d look.”

"If she thinks she can hide anywhere," growled Wolverine, "then she doesn't know the X-Men very well."

"Indeed," said Shaw, "so where better to prepare for the inevitable confrontation than at the seat of her power?"

"He's right," said Phoenix. "Selene has allied herself with the demon Blackheart—and, according to our latest information, he's confined to the underground levels of the Hellfire Club building. With him by her side, she's almost invincible."

"May I also remind you," said Shaw, "that the Hellfire Club and Shaw Industries do still maintain a controlling interest in the Legacy project. What Selene has taken is as much my property as it is yours." "What Selene has taken," said Nightcrawler, "is our friend—or are you forgetting him?"

"And we're not likely to rescue him without a fight," said Cyclops. "In that eventuality, we need to know we can rely on each other implicitly."

"Comes down to it," said Wolverine, "we don't know whose side you'll fight on."

"I believe we can trust him."

Cyclops was surprised by Storm's quiet interjection. She had opened her eyes and sat up, but she still looked weak. Her expression, however, was determined. He gave her a quizzical look, and she elaborated: "Sebastian saved my life down in the tunnels."

"Saved his own life, more like," scoffed Moira.

"No," said Storm, shaking her head firmly. "He didn't have to shield me, too."

A long silence followed, during which Cyclops tried to think of a way to refute that statement but could not. "He is also right," Storm added quietly. "His assistance could prove invaluable to us."

"OK," said Cyclops, unable to conceal his reluctance. "But this is an X-Men mission, Shaw—and as long as you're

fighting with us, you'll follow my orders. Do you understand me?"

"Oh, I understand perfectly," said Shaw with an infuriating smirk.

The sun was rising, coloring the North Pacific Ocean in shades of red. But Shaw's mood was dark as he perched upon the edge of a plush leather couch in the back of a Hellfire Club jet and stared out of a tiny window at the water far below him. He had told the X-Men-much to their annoyance—that he had some business to attend to before he could meet them in New York. Still, as much of a lead as he gave them and as fast as their Blackbird was, he knew he could beat them there. He would reach the Club's headquarters on Hong Kong Island in a matter of minutes, whereupon his White Rook, Fitzroy, could open a portal between continents for him.

In the meantime, he glared at the portable computer in his lap as if it might explode. His agents had fetched it for him along with the plane. His old one had likely been flattened along with his office beneath the Kree island-although he would still have to retrieve it, whatever the cost or the danger to his people. He couldn't leave open the possibility that the files stored upon it might be salvaged by political opponents.

On the screen of the laptop, a trident icon was blinking. Shaw's partner in the Legacy project wanted to speak with him. Impossible as it seemed, Shaw had no doubt that he knew what had happened already. He had been putting off the moment when he would have to return his call. He sighed and glanced around, but the only other person in the spacious compartment was Tessa. She was lost in thought, presumably adapting to the loss of the island, running cost projections and situation analyses through her computer mind.

As Shaw's fingers flickered across the small keyboard, he set his lips into a line and his face into a studiedly neutral

expression. His partner usually kept him waiting, but this time his digitally disguised image sprang onto the screen almost immediately. The man's eyes burnt in his blacked-out face. His voice, electronically filtered, was harsh with contempt, making the laptop's tiny speakers pop and crackle. "Can I trust you to do nothing, Shaw?"

Shaw bit his lip but fumed inwardly.

"First, you allow the X-Men to become involved in our project. Now, as a direct result of that folly, you have lost both the Beast and the island."

"Selene's intervention was unexpected," Shaw conceded, "but not necessarily unfortunate."

"It happened as a result of your ineptitude. It was your choice to welcome that witch back into your Inner Circle, to share your secrets with her when she had betrayed you before."

"And now," said Shaw through clenched teeth, "we have the opportunity to play off the X-Men against another force. I can turn this situation to our advantage."

"As you have promised before. You are running out of chances, Shaw."

"May I remind you," said Shaw, controlling his anger, "that we entered into this partnership on equal terms. I do not care to be spoken to as if I were a mere lackey."

"And may I remind *you*," snapped his anonymous partner, "that had I not raised the abandoned Kree island from the seabed and helped to fund your research into the Legacy Virus, then we could not have come even this far."

Shaw bowed his head as if accepting the point. The truth was that, of all the temporary alliances he had made in his life, all the dangerous deals he had struck for the sake of expediency, he had resented none more than this one. His current partner's money alone could not have bought him a stake in a project so close to the Black King's heart. His offer of alien technology, however, had proved impossible to resist.

Shaw had taken a tiger by the tail; he was under no illusions about that. He had to tread very carefully. He couldn't afford to reveal his contempt for this loathsome man just yet.

"There is still hope," he said evenly. "The cure may still exist in McCoy's blood."

"Clearly," snapped his partner, "That, I imagine, is why Selene took him in the first place." He leaned forward until his angry eyes seemed to fill the screen. "Get him back, Shaw."

"I intend to."

The communications link was abruptly broken, and Shaw allowed himself a secret scowl. He wouldn't put up with being belittled for much longer.

He sank back into the soft couch and formed his fingers into a steeple in front of his nose and mouth as he slipped into quiet contemplation. The X-Men, he knew from hard-earned experience, were formidable opponents. With him at their side, he prided himself that their chances against Selene were quite good. Whether they could defeat her in time to rescue their ailing comrade before the supercell in his system extinguished itself was another matter. But Shaw's most challenging task would not be to dethrone the Black Queen; it would be to ensure that the Legacy cure, should it be retrieved, was kept out of the outlaw mutants' hands. Out of their hands, and out of the hands of his so-called partner.

Sebastian Shaw had been working towards this goal for a long time; since long before the X-Men, Selene or anybody else had chosen to interfere. He had invested a lot of time and money into the battle against the Legacy Virus. He had made plans and dreamt of possibilities, and all of them depended upon his being the sole benefactor of the eventual fruits of his labor.

Now, it seemed that his longed-for cure was almost within his grasp at last-albeit still tantalizingly out of reach-

and he had no intention of sharing it with anybody.

GHAPTE



AT FIRST, Phoenix didn't know why Sage had taken the X-Men and Shaw into the subway station at 24th Street and Sixth Avenue. It appeared long deserted, its floor layered with

dust and the windows of its ticket office cracked and cobwebbed. At some point, it had been the site of a fierce battle: one end of the station had collapsed, and much of the fallen brickwork and earth was fused into slag. Jean could detect no thought patterns. Still, Sage approached the blocked entrance to the PATH system—the train line that connected Manhattan to New Jersey—and spoke in a loud, clear voice: “Knight to Queen’s 8, checkmate.”

The obstruction fizzled out like a television picture cut off from its signal. A flight of steps was revealed, and Sage led the way down toward bright lights and the sound of low voices. She passed three teenaged boys, who stared at their colorfully clad visitors with saucer-wide eyes. “Lightshow has the power to create solid holograms,” said Sage, “and with Booster here amplifying his power, he can make them all but permanent. DK will replace the dust that we disturbed on our way through.” She glanced at Phoenix. “And we have four telepaths. We work on a rota system, keeping our presence masked from psi-sensitives.”

“You’re sure well hidden down here,” said Rogue.

“We have to be.”

Their arrival on the PATH platform was greeted by a sudden hush as a dozen heads turned towards them. To Phoenix’s disappointment, she saw no familiar faces. If Sage’s group represented the main opposition to Selene’s rule, she would have expected to find at least some X-Men, past or present, among its members. Unless, she thought with a chill, there were no X-Men left. Perhaps she ought to have put the question to Sage; she was wearing the team’s logo, after all, and must have had some contact with them. But she didn’t think she was ready for the answer yet. She tried to console herself with the thought that so far she had seen only a small portion of the rebels’ base. The platform and the tracks to each side of it had been partitioned into many smaller areas by white sheets hung from frayed ropes.

A young woman with a shaved head—another Genoshan mutate, presumably—had disappeared between two such sheets upon the X-Men's arrival. She returned now at the heels of a taller man with a confident gait and a regal bearing. His clothing was pure white, which made him look as if he had just stepped out of a detergent commercial; it also covered every inch of his skin. He wore a white jacket and breeches, white boots and gloves, a white waistcoat and a white cravat around the collar of his white shirt. He even wore a white mask, which covered his face and hair and left only his eyes exposed.

Sage went to him and slipped an affectionate arm around his waist. "Allow me to introduce the savior of mutantkind," she said.

The X-Men approached the pair more warily. "Looks like Hellfire scum to me," growled Wolverine.

"Selene only allows Black royalty into her Inner Circle," said the white-clad man, his voice muffled by his white mask. "She is too arrogant—and yet also too weak—to expose herself to contrasting opinions."

"So, let me guess," said Nightcrawler, "you must be the White King, *nicht wahr?*"

"For now, I am merely a White Knight, charged with leading my troops to victory."

"Whereupon," said Phoenix, "you will be 'crowned,' I expect." "Indeed," said the White Knight. "But I will be a benevolent King. My first act will be to lower the barrier around this city. Then I shall ensure distribution of the Legacy cure to all who need it. I will liberate New York, and mutants worldwide."

"If your motives are so pure," said Cyclops, "why the mask?"

"I might ask the same question of you, my friend."

"The White Knight is the figurehead of our movement," said Sage. "If Selene learned his true identity, she would hunt him down and subject him to unimaginable torments. If

his followers do not have that information, then they cannot be tortured for it.”

“You must all be tired,” said the White Knight. “I know what you have been through to reach us. We have prepared quarters for you, if you would care to follow me.”

Phoenix, like the rest of the X-Men, looked to Cyclops for his lead. She knew that her husband was exhausted and would welcome nothing more than a few hours’ sleep, but he concealed it well. “I think we have a few things to discuss first,” he said tersely.

“On the contrary,” said Sage, “everything is well in hand.”

“And you must get some rest,” said the White Knight, “before we make our final assault upon Selene tomorrow night.”

He turned and swept through a join in the hanging sheets, as if in no doubt that he would be followed. Cyclops hesitated for a second before proving him right. His teammates took their cue from him. Shaw, who had been silent since they had left Avengers Mansion, stepped through the gap alongside Storm. Sage brought up the rear. Phoenix fell into step beside the former Tessa as they made their way down a narrow corridor formed by sheets on each side. It was like walking through a circus tent-except for the intermittent sound of hacking coughs, which served to remind her that New York was a city under self-imposed quarantine.

“How many rebels are there?” she asked.

“Thirty-seven,” said Sage with typical precision, “in addition to our leader and myself.”

“I didn’t recognize anybody.” It was a simple statement of fact, but the possible implications of it caused a sick, nervous flutter in Phoenix’s stomach as she spoke.

“Twenty-four of our people are Genoshan mutates, who came here seeking Selene’s cure. A further seven were

made aware of their mutant genes only when they became infected.”

Phoenix was about to ask about the remaining seven when one of them pushed her way into the makeshift passageway from a small compartment beside it. She was a young woman, short and slender, with blonde hair cut short at the back but falling over her face at the front. Unlike most of her colleagues, who were dressed in simple fatigues or Genoshan slave uniforms, she wore a stylish trouser suit which had no doubt been expensive. Jean recognized her, but she couldn't quite place her. Most likely, she had seen her picture in the X-Men's files. The woman looked startled, and she turned away and threw her hands up to her face as if hoping to hide it. Phoenix followed the broken line of her sight, and was interested to see that it ended at Sebastian Shaw. He didn't appear to have seen the woman.

The White Knight dropped onto the left-hand set of tracks and, brushing aside a final white sheet, led his guests into the tunnel. A train had been stranded there, its doors jammed open. The X-Men made their way in single file between the vehicle and the tunnel wall, and followed their host on board. The seats had been ripped out of the carriage, five camp beds and a pile of blankets jammed into the narrow space instead. “We have made our finest rooms available to you,” said the White Knight with a trace of humor. “The five gentlemen can sleep in here; the ladies will find a further three beds in the adjoining carriage.”

“Sage wasn't exaggerating then,” said Nightcrawler. “You certainly were expecting us.”

The White Knight cleared his throat. “We have known for some time of Selene's spell, and we have been awaiting your return.”

“Unfortunately,” said Sage, “we couldn't greet you when you arrived. We couldn't station agents too close to the Hellfire Club without their being sensed. We had to wait until you had escaped from the Black Queen, and then find you.”

“We shall leave you now,” said the White Knight, “and talk more tomorrow. I am sure you have many questions.”

That was certainly true-but right now, those questions didn't seem to matter. It was still early evening, but the X-Men hadn't slept last night and Phoenix was weaiy. She wanted to draw a line beneath the events of this difficult day. Perhaps things would look better in the morning. Perhaps, at least, she would be able to think more clearly, to start to deal with everything that had happened. She followed Rogue into the next carriage and lowered her aching body onto a camp bed, covering herself with warm blankets.

Storm, she realized, had lingered in the doorway to conduct a muttered conversation with Wolverine. Phoenix shouldn't have been able to overhear them, but she inadvertently caught the pair's surface thoughts, which served to amplify their words for her.

“Just thought you ought to know,” said Wolverine, “I caught the White Knight's scent. Didn't quite believe it at first-thought I must've been mistaken—but now I'm sure.”

Storm nodded. “I don't know how it can be possible either.”

“You recognized him too, right?”

“His body language, his speech patterns ... yes, my friend, I recognized him.”

They parted then, Wolverine returning to his own carriage as Storm took the final bed in this one. Phoenix drifted into sleep, with one more puzzle to ponder on when morning came.

Shaw lay still and listened to the sounds of breathing-and the occasional snore—until he was sure that none of his roommates were awake. He had been through as much as most of them, but his energy-absorbing powers had allowed him to refresh himself repeatedly, and he had needed no more sleep than usual. His body clock had been thrown off by his journey through time, but he guessed that midnight

was some hours past, dawn yet to come. The light from the platform, some of which had found its way into the train carriage last night, had been extinguished and he could hear no voices.

He levered himself out of his camp bed, wincing as it groaned beneath his weight. He tiptoed towards the nearest door, but caught his breath as he saw that the one bed in his way appeared empty. Then he remembered that the berth was occupied by Nightcrawler, whose mutant gene allowed him to blend into the darkness. Concentrating, he was able to discern the outline of the goblin-like X-Man, fast asleep.

As he stepped out into the tunnel, however, he was assailed by the stink of cigar smoke. Wolverine was blocking his way to the platform, leaning against the side of the carriage. "And where do you think you're slipping away to, 'Your Majesty'?"

"I find myself restless," said Shaw. "I desired some fresh air." He looked pointedly at Wolverine's cigar, and the Canadian X-Man seemed to accept his explanation. He allowed the Black King to squeeze past him and continue on his way.

As he hauled himself up onto the platform, Shaw heard Wolverine's soft but threatening growl behind him. "I'm watching you, bub."

A few night-lights had been jury-rigged into the roof wiring to dispel the subterranean blackness. Shaw's eyes adjusted slowly to the desultory illumination as he made his way along the platform and peered into each partitioned cubicle in turn. His gaze was met by more than one pair of wide eyes from the camp beds therein, but nobody spoke to him nor raised an alarm. He saw no sign of Sage or the White Knight, but presumed that their quarters were housed further along the train or in a second one at the other end of the station. Either way, he had no doubt that they would be together, in adjoining rooms if not in the same bed. He was

hurt by that thought. As often as he had been betrayed in the past, he had come to rely on Tessa, trusting her as he had trusted few others in his life. Bad enough that she had thrown in her lot with the X-Men in his absence; now she also had a new master, to whom she showed as much loyalty as she ever had to him.

He put such thoughts from his mind. It was not Tessa who concerned him at present.

He found the young blonde woman asleep on her back, hair splayed across her pillow, a displaced blanket revealing an elegant silk negligee. Three confident strides took him to her side. He dropped to his haunches and placed one hand across her nose and mouth, the other atop it. Her sleep became fitful as her brain slowly registered the fact that she could not breathe. A second later, her alarmed eyes snapped open.

“Good morning, Ms. Payge,” said Shaw with a cruel smile. “I do apologize for my earlier rudeness. I trust you didn’t think I had forgotten you?”

The world distorted around him. The white sheet walls of Reeve Payge’s quarters became screeching ghosts, reaching out to entangle the unwanted intruder. Shaw had been prepared for this. Even with her mouth covered, Payge could sub-vocalize notes which, although beyond the range of human hearing, wreaked havoc with the neurochemistry of the brain. He closed his eyes, but he could still see the leering phantoms and feel the floor pitching beneath him. He ignored the illusion and the dizziness that came with it, and focussed upon his own body, determined not to move a muscle.

“Not a very bright idea, Ms. Payge,” he said through gritted teeth. She was more powerful than he had thought. Not powerful enough, though. “I am well aware of your abilities, and I can assure you that they won’t keep me from suffocating you, should you force me to do so.”

His surroundings returned to normal, although he wasn't sure if Payge had given up because of his threat or because she had run out of breath. He had pinched her nostrils closed; she could still suck in air through her covered mouth, but not nearly enough. She tried to remove his hands, but he was pressing down too hard. She ceased her struggle at last, and her eyes pleaded with him for mercy.

"That's better," said Shaw. "Now I am going to take my hands away in a moment-and, when I do, you will have one chance and one chance only to speak to me. If you wish to survive this night, you will use that chance to answer one simple question."

Beneath his hands, Reeva Payge nodded eagerly, her eyes saying: *Anything*.

"I have been waiting a long time to find you, Ms. Payge-you or one of your colleagues. I know all about you. I know you served on the Inner Circle of the New York Hellfire Club under my son. All I want to know is this: where is he? Where is Shinobi?"

He loosened his hold, then, just a little, and Payge's chest heaved as she sucked in great lungs full of air. Shaw waited until finally, in a halting voice, she gave him his answer.

A minute later, he sank into a canvas chair in the small communal area at the front end of the platform. He hadn't expected to find one of his son's minions here, of all places. After all this time. Her presence had complicated things. Now, he had two matters to attend to; two tasks that were each as important as anything he had ever done. He burned with impatience to get started, but he was trapped in this hovel by the boy Lightshow's so-called solid holograms. He had no doubt that the tunnels would be blocked as the stairs were. His original plan had been to wake the young mutant and force him to lower his barriers—but that might cause a commotion which, with Wolverine on the alert, he could well do without.

Somebody had left a combat jacket slung over a collapsible table. Shaw took it and donned it over the shredded top half of his boiler suit. He settled back in the chair again, and fought down his own mounting frustration as the slow seconds ticked by. Whatever the situation, he had always known the importance of biding his time.

Wolverine had familiarized himself with the layout of the station, in case of an emergency. One of his concerns had been that an enemy could stumble upon the rebels simply by exploring the subway system; however, a hundred yards beyond the train on which the rest of the X-Men slumbered, the tunnel ended at a brick wall. He had tested it, feeling that its texture wasn't quite right. A solid hologram, then. He had given it a few experimental taps and felt it vibrate beneath his knuckles. Its function was to deflect attention rather than force; chances were, it wouldn't take much of the latter to get through it.

When his worst-case scenario was realized, then, he was prepared.

He leapt into action before the echoes of the explosion had died down. He popped his claws and clattered them along the side of the train as he loped past it, shouting: "Heads up people, we're under attack!"

He caught the decaying stench of Selene's demons before he saw them. They rushed out of a pall of smoke towards him, at least eight of them, and he greeted them with deadly force. But the demons and the smoke overwhelmed his sensitive nostrils, and he didn't detect the less pungent scent of an old foe until it was too late.

She reared up in front of him and took him by surprise. Her claws were as sharp and unyielding as his, and he roared in animal pain as she raked them across his face. He made to strike back, his anger fuelled by the burning lines on his cheek, but she had already sprung away from him with remarkable agility and grace. Snarling, he lunged for her, but the demons held him back. They were trying to

bear him down by sheer weight of numbers, and he was forced to concentrate on extricating himself from a headlock. As he was thus distracted, the woman darted in behind him and struck again, her claws biting into his back.

As Wolverine's rage grew, he abandoned his attempts to fight defensively. He lashed out as hard as he could, not caring what damage the demons did to him as long as he could hurt them in return. Three fell and didn't rise again, but a fourth got a hold on his back and wouldn't let go. He sensed the woman moving in behind him and twisted around, bracing himself against the demon and meeting her charge with a two-footed kick to the gut. He felt like he had stubbed his toes on the hull of a battleship, but he succeeded in repulsing her.

A cold smile spread across her pale face, and her dead eyes glowed. She returned his glare with a calculating gaze, waiting for her next chance. She flexed the foot-long, double-jointed fingers that Wolverine knew were artificial. They were forged from metal, laced like his own claws with adamantium, wrapped in artificial flesh and sharpened to cruel points. Much of her body was artificial too, replaced in an insane quest to make herself stronger and more durable. Her legs were armor-plated, and Wolverine doubted that there was much flesh, blood or bone left beneath them. She wore a scarlet and white Japanese-style headdress and robes as if to remind him of the Samurai training that had made her a deadly warrior even before her surgical enhancements. She had done all this to herself for one reason: to become Wolverine's nemesis. Once, she had been called Yuriko Oyama; now she answered to the name of Lady Deathstrike.

His senses gave him advance notice of the arrival of two teammates. It took them seconds to enter striking range, but to him the delay seemed huge. Then a blast from Cyclops's eyes stunned the demon on his back and dislodged it, as Phoenix hurled a second creature away with

her mind. Freed at last, Wolverine lunged at Deathstrike. Her torso, he knew, was protected, so he aimed for her eyes. She was too able, and he was too hurt already, for him to risk holding back.

She was fast. She pulled her head away from him, but he marked her face. She struck back but, unhindered now, Wolverine dropped beneath her arms, drove his shoulder into her stomach to unbalance her and delivered a double uppercut to her jaw.

The Hellfire Club demons had tried to follow him, but Cyclops and Phoenix had reached them and they were keeping each other busy for now. "Looks like it's just you and me, lady," snarled Wolverine as he and Deathstrike circled, each looking for an opening, each waiting for the other to let down his or her guard.

"I would have it no other way, gaijin," she hissed. The skin of her cheek was already being regenerated, knit back together by microscopic nanites; her artificial healing factor was at least as impressive as Wolverine's natural one.

"Yeah? Looked to me like you were quite happy to hide behind Selene's foot soldiers a few seconds ago. What's up-they change the definition of 'honor' while I was away?"

"It is not my fault if you were foolish enough to be caught alone."

"What are you doing here, Deathstrike?" sneered Wolverine. "You ain't a mutant, you're a cyborg. Selene let you through the barrier in return for doing her dirty work, did she?"

"My agreement with Selene—" Deathstrike began, but he didn't hear the rest. He saw an opportunity and seized it. He flew at her, concentrating his attack upon her face again; he cut her skin to ribbons, exposing metal beneath it, but she wasn't hurt. Mechanical modifications to Deathstrike's nervous system ensured that her brain no longer received pain signals. Wolverine should have been so lucky.

Deathstrike was an excellent hand-to-hand fighter, perhaps even too good. Her apparent savagery masked her mastery of the martial arts. Wolverine knew a few moves himself, but she kept him on the defensive, forever having to shift his body weight as she tried to throw him, denied an opportunity to take the initiative. Had he not already been wounded, had she not begun the battle with the advantage of numbers, then things might have been different. As it was, it was all he could do to keep his opponent busy.

The merest slip on his part and she would kill him.

Even as the X-Men had leapt out of the subway train, they had heard screams from the platform and realized that, whatever was happening, it was a two-pronged attack. As Cyclops and Phoenix had rushed to help Wolverine, Rogue had headed in the opposite direction, followed by Storm and Iceman. Nightcrawler had teleported ahead of her.

At first, it was difficult to tell what was going on. The dim lighting cast indistinct, undulating shadows on the hanging white sheets. Storm took to the air for a better perspective, but a bloodcurdling shriek just a few meters ahead of Rogue convinced her that she had no time to wait for a report. She waded into the labyrinth, trusting to her tough skin to shield her from unexpected attacks. She found herself in an empty sleeping cubicle.

“Rogue,” called Storm from above her, “an assailant is heading your way at two o’clock.”

She turned, in time to watch as a partition was torn down the middle and a Hellfire Club demon sprang through the gap. It seemed pleased to have found a victim, and saliva dribbled from its mouth in anticipation. Rogue’s fists soon changed its expression.

A klaxon alarm began to sound; it was tinny and swamped in static, and she guessed that it was being broadcast over the station’s public address system. “This base has been compromised,” reported the calm voice of Sage. “All resistance fighters will evacuate immediately and

regroup at Location D.” Simultaneously, she heard Phoenix’s voice in her head, informing her of the identity of one of the intruders.

Rogue stumbled into the main passageway to find a melee in progress. A blinding flash—Storm’s doing, no doubt-seared her eyeballs but allowed her to see that Nightcrawler was fending off another three demons. He teleported into the air above them, wrapped his prehensile tail around one of the ropes from which the sheets hung, and swung past them like a trapeze artist. One of the demons tried to follow him by climbing a sheet, but only brought it down upon its own head and those of its fellows. Nightcrawler confused them further by striking out from above, behind, beside them while they were blinded.

Rogue threw him a quick grin and a wink as she flew by. She had set her sights upon another figure, who had appeared at the end of the passageway. He was taller-or perhaps simply more upright-than the demons. She realized who it had to be a second before she saw him clearly; after all, if Deathstrike was here, then he couldn’t be too far away. She was still too late to react, though, as beams of force stabbed from his eyes. The pain knocked her out of the sky, but she gritted her teeth, picked herself up and continued towards him on foot.

“Where is Shaw?” he demanded in a deep, resonant voice.

“Y’all know how to make a girl feel unwanted,” complained Rogue. “Shaw’s dance card is all full at the moment, so you’ll just have to tango with me, Donny boy.”

Donald Pierce met Rogue’s charge unflinchingly. She had forgotten how strong he was—or perhaps he had made himself stronger. Like Deathstrike, he was a cyborg. When the X-Men had first encountered him, as a member of Shaw’s Inner Circle, he had passed for human. Some years and many self-inflicted operations later, he looked like a tall, gaunt android. His regal red robes disguised the alterations

somewhat, but the powerful arms that shot out from beneath them to return Rogue's blows were pure metal. He wore a black headdress, the inside of which was doubtless imprinted with circuitry, and long scars on his face betrayed the fact that the skin had been folded back to allow devices of various kinds to be implanted.

There was something wrong with his eyes and, as Rogue grappled with him, she realized what it was. He had three eyeballs in each; knowing Pierce, at least two of them had to be weapons. She held him in a headlock, forcing him to look away from her so that he couldn't blast her again. Her ears were full of the klaxon alarm, and of Sage's voice as it repeated its message word for word. It was recorded, she realized, playing on a loop tape.

"I'm not interested in you, girl," snarled Pierce, "only Shaw. Step away from me now and I will allow you to live."

"That's mighty big of you, sugar," said Rogue, pummeling him in the face, "but you'll forgive me if I don't take the word of a self-mutilating freak for that."

He let out a furious roar, flexed his muscles of steel and sent Rogue reeling. Suddenly, she was in danger from his eyes again; he stunned her with her another blast and leapt on top of her, metal fingers reaching for her throat. She staggered backward into one of the cubicles and fell onto a camp bed, flattening it. Pierce landed on her like a ten-ton weight. She succeeded in rolling out from beneath him-but before she could regain her footing, he drove a fist into the back of her head. She returned the gesture in kind, but stars were exploding in front of her eyes. She blinked, and suddenly Pierce was lifting her off the floor by her neck.

She heard footsteps, and hoped for a moment that reinforcements were arriving. Two young mutants came into view, both reacting with horror when they saw what was happening. They ran for the exit, giving Rogue and her attacker a wide berth. So much for the White Knight's "resistance fighters," she thought. And her teammates were

obviously still occupied with the demons and who knew what else, oblivious to her predicament.

Pierce was channeling more power into his hydraulic fingers, strengthening his grip. Rogue was used to considering herself near invulnerable, but even she had her limits. It was getting hard to breathe, and black shapes crowded her vision. She kicked against him with her dangling feet, but only hurt her toes on his armor. She clamped her hands onto his head, dug her thumbs into his eyes and tried to pry his headress loose in the hope that it would take a few mechanical parts of his brain with it. It came free at last, the tiny wires on its underside sparking and popping, and the dead skin of Pierce's scalp peeled back beneath it to reveal the top of a metal-plated skull. His eyes fizzled and sent an electric shock into Rogue's hands, which made them spasm and lose their hold. His face went blank for a second, but then his expression of clenched-tooth fury returned and his fingers tightened further around her throat.

It was time for desperate measures. Rogue was weakening, and her arms felt leaden but she forced them to move, forced her right hand to meet her left and to remove its green glove. Her eyeballs had rolled back into her head and she could no longer see, but she reached out blindly, finding metal, metal, metal.. *flesh*

It took only the briefest of contacts, her bare skin to Pierce's, to activate Rogue's mutant ability. His thoughts, his memories, rushed into her head and threatened to overwrite her own. As she struggled to hold on to her sense of self, she could feel her body changing too, taking on the characteristics of his. She didn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved that his cybernetic augmentations were not part of the deal. Without them, Pierce had no more strength than a normal human being—less than most, in fact—but at least she didn't have to learn what it felt like to have enslaved herself, body and soul, to machinery.

It was hard enough to cope with Pierce's hatred. It was a living thing, a black snake which slithered its way through her mind and left a trail of poison. She hated the X-Men for standing in her *[his]* way, preventing her *[him]* from attaining the power and respect that was due to her *[him]*. But her loathing for them was nothing compared to that which she felt for the Hellfire Club. She hated Fitzroy, but she was forced to work alongside him. She had only contempt for Selene, but she (fre-this was *Donald Pierce*, not her; Rogue would be lost if she forgot that) saw some advantage in serving her as a Black Bishop for the present.

Most of all, Pierce hated the man who had expelled him—twice— from the Hellfire Club's upper echelons. He remembered being hurled from Sebastian Shaw's helicopter, left to die at the frozen heart of the Swiss Alps. Rogue burnt with the all-consuming desire for bloody vengeance against Shaw-and just for a moment, nothing else mattered to her and she was prepared to go to any lengths, do anything to herself, to achieve it.

Then the moment passed and she found herself on the floor, her own personality dominant again, and Donald Pierce was reeling as if out of control, his hands clutched to his head. He steadied himself and revealed his face. It was blank again, his mouth hanging open, and his movements were jerky. He looked like a zombie. It took Rogue a second to deduce that her energy drain had knocked him out, that only his cybernetic limbs and computerized systems were keeping him standing. As his eyes flashed, however, she realized that they were doing more than that. She moved sluggishly, but fortunately he did too, and she was able to avoid an optic blast that tore a hole through the canvas of the broken camp bed.

Pierce's head turned to track her, and Rogue prayed that she could keep dodging him until some of her strength returned.

At that moment, however, a bolt of electricity stabbed down from the ceiling. Pierce was enveloped in a blue corona and one of his eyes exploded. He didn't fall, but his arms fell to his sides and his chin lolled onto his chest. Storm landed beside Rogue and helped her to her feet. "Hurry," she said. "I think we should gain some distance before Pierce has a chance to recover and reboot his systems."

"We're running?" asked Rogue, surprised but not entirely unhappy with the idea.

"I have been in telepathic contact with Phoenix. The White Knight and his followers have already evacuated. We have nothing to gain by prolonging this conflict."

"You've sold me," said Rogue. "Let's go!"

Phoenix was relieved when the last demon fell. She had restricted herself to fighting them hand-to-hand or with her telekinesis, because reaching into their minds-as she had discovered to her cost a year ago-was like plunging into a pit of black bile from which she feared she might never be able to resurface.

Deathstrike's mind, however, was little better. It was cold, and its contents were so fragmented that they were almost impossible to make sense of. Phoenix shuddered with revulsion as she realized that the cyborg's implants had taken over some of her brain functions. She couldn't detect thoughts that were being transmitted through wiring, nor read memories that were stored on hard drives.

Cyclops had a different problem: Wolverine and Deathstrike were fighting at such close quarters, their moves so fast and precise, that it was hard for him to get a bead on the villain without endangering his teammate. He fired one optic blast, which staggered her for a second and gave Wolverine a brief advantage-but before he could target her again, she had recovered, and now she was deliberately using her opponent as a shield.

Phoenix focused her mind upon Lady Deathstrike's foot, pressure building up behind her eyes. It took only a small telekinetic nudge at a critical moment to shift the cyborg's center of gravity. Wolverine did the rest, throwing Deathstrike over his shoulder before she could adjust to the upset. She landed on her back, and Cyclops pounded her with the full power of his eyes. She was still conscious, struggling to rise against the beams of force, until Wolverine launched himself at her in a flurry of fists and claws.

"I could've handled her myself," he said gruffly as he stood over Deathstrike's prone form. Phoenix smiled to herself; it would have been unwise to dispute his claim out loud.

"The X-Men are a team, Wolverine," said Cyclops, tight-lipped. He turned to Phoenix. "What's the situation? Where are the others?" She had anticipated the question, and was already looking for Storm's mind. She found it, and reported that the African X-Man was leading Rogue, Nightcrawler and Iceman to the surface. "We'll leave through the tunnel," decided Cyclops. "It's best to remain in small groups if Selene's demons are on the prowl. Do we have any idea where this emergency hideout of Sage's might be; this 'Location D'?" Phoenix was about to answer in the negative when she realized that Wolverine was kneeling beside his fallen foe, his claws poised above her heart as if to strike. Cyclops saw him at the same time; he whirled around and, without stopping to ask questions, stung his teammate's hand with a low-intensity optic blast.

"What the hell are you doing?" cried Wolverine, leaping to his feet.

Cyclops squared up to him. "I was about to ask you the same question."

"That psycho would kill us all without a second thought. You might not be attached to your hide, Summers, but I'm not giving her another chance to scalp mine."

“That’s not how we operate, Logan.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all before. ‘X-Men don’t kill.’ But in case you hadn’t noticed, this ain’t Kansas any more—and desperate times breed desperate measures.”

“Not while I’m in charge of this team,” snapped Cyclops. “Now sheathe those claws and step away from Deathstrike—and that’s an order, mister!”

Wolverine glared at his team leader mutinously, until Phoenix stepped between them. “I think we should talk about this later,” she said gently. “Selene knows where we are now. We could face another attack at any moment.”

“Jeannie’s right,” conceded Wolverine. He popped his claws back into their housings, but his eyes were still narrowed and fixed on Cyclops. As the trio of X-Men hurried down the subway tunnel, away from the compromised PATH station, Phoenix heard him muttering under his breath: “But this discussion ain’t over yet. Not by a long shot.”

CHAPTER 8

A BRIGHT YELLOW light spilled out of the brownstone mansion house and seemed to stain the Fifth Avenue sidewalk. New York was twelve hours behind Hong Kong but, although its night was now giving way to the dark hours of morning, the muted sounds of revelry continued unabated. Membership of the local branch of the Hellfire Club had fallen off under Selene's stewardship, or so the X-Men had heard, but it evidently still held its attractions.

Nightcrawler couldn't understand why. It was well known that the Black Queen was consorting with a demon, and that she had turned the catacombs beneath her new abode into her own personal underworld. She had paraded both facts in front of an unwitting audience on Halloween night, only a month ago, shortly after she had claimed her throne. The Hellfire Club's rich patrons had dabbled with the trappings of diabolism for over two centuries, but this was different. Kurt didn't know how they could even set foot across Selene's threshold, knowing that to do so was to place their souls in jeopardy.

Many of them, he supposed, knew no better: bored billionaires looking for a vicarious thrill, a temporary release from their dull lives, tempted by the allure of the dark. They probably didn't quite believe the rumors or didn't understand the significance of them. They didn't have his experience. Nightcrawler couldn't prove that a Hell existed-although he had faith that it did-but his time with the X-Men had exposed him to many infernal realms that were only too real. He knew what evils lurked in the deepest dimensions, and the idea that foolish men still thought they could play games with such terrible entities scared him silly.

Ironically, most of the people in the Hellfire Club's ballroom at present would probably have fled in fear at the

sight of Kurt's own demonic form; either that or attacked him out of blind panic. To remain inconspicuous, he was forced to use an image inducer. This pocket-sized technological marvel cast a holographic field around him, which made him appear human. In fact, thanks to Nightcrawler's tongue-in-cheek humor, it made him look rather like his childhood role model, swashbuckling movie star Errol Flynn.

For the rest of the X-Men, more prosaic disguises were adequate. They loitered inside the perimeter of Central Park, watching the building across the road but looking to the untrained eye like nothing more than a group of friends taking in some fresh air before they went home. They were, of course, ready to shed their outer garments in a second should circumstances call for their "working clothes." They lost more overcoats and hats that way...

"I can't detect any trace of Hank inside the building," said Phoenix.

"That's hardly surprising though, is it?" said Nightcrawler. Phoenix agreed. "Selene is a powerful telepath herself. She could easily mask his presence."

"We'll proceed on the assumption that she does have Hank in there," decided Cyclops, "until we find proof to the contrary."

"Then I say we move now," said Wolverine, "Shaw or no Shaw." Cyclops shook his head. "Too many people could get caught in the crossfire."

"If they don't want to get hurt, they'd better have the sense to get out of our way."

"They're innocents, Logan."

"That's relative," contested Wolverine. "No one ever signed up to the Hellfire Club for its charitable works. Anyway, chances are that's why Selene threw this bash in the first place; to keep us from going in there and nailing her till it's too late."

“Wolvie’s got a point there,” said Rogue. “If we wait for this here shindig to wind up, we could be standing here till mid-morning. Hank might not have that long.”

Cyclops nodded. “OK, I accept that-but I’d still like to keep this operation as low-key as possible. I don’t want to go in there with all guns blazing.”

“What else do you suggest?” asked Rogue. “Walking up to Selene’s front door and knocking didn’t do you a whole power of good last time.”

“And nor did trying to slip in the back way,” said Iceman ruefully. Nightcrawler hadn’t been present when four of his teammates had last confronted Selene, but he knew it had not gone well. The Black Queen’s mutant senses and mystical abilities combined to make it near impossible to sneak up on her. And this time, she would be expecting visitors. He wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that she was watching them at this very moment.

“We’ve agreed that the Beast is probably being kept on the lower levels,” said Cyclops, “where Blackheart can guard him. If we can get down there without disturbing the party guests and keep any combat confined to the catacombs ...”

“I believe Logan knows the sewers beneath the building,” said Storm. Indeed, Nightcrawler recalled that his teammate had once infiltrated the Hellfire Club’s headquarters from below, back when Sebastian Shaw had been its owner.

“Before Selene’s renovations, yeah,” said Wolverine.

“It might still be the best way to get a group in there,” said Phoenix.

“I can assist you there.”

For the second time that day, Shaw had approached the X-Men without their knowing it. He had even managed to remain downwind of Wolverine. He liked to make an entrance; the circus-bred showman inside Kurt Wagner could identify with that. The Black King of Hong Kong had discarded his usual finery and was dressed for action in a

simple green padded boiler suit and heavy black gloves, belt and boots.

"About flaming time," grumbled Wolverine under his breath.

"It is precisely one o'clock," Shaw told him with a smirk on his lips and a glint in his eye. "That, I believe, is the time we agreed for this rendezvous."

"You had a suggestion to make?" prompted Storm, forestalling any further argument.

"As I explained at the Pacific facility," said Shaw, "I know this building better than anybody, Selene included. I know all the secret passageways that run through it."

"Can you get us inside undetected?" asked Phoenix.

"Unlikely. But I can make it difficult for Selene to keep track of us once we're in."

"Good enough," said Cyclops. "We split into three teams, then, and converge on the catacombs from three separate points. With luck, Selene won't be able to intercept us all. Wolverine and Nightcrawler, you take the sewers; Shaw, I need two more routes."

"That won't be a problem."

"If it's all the same to you, mein Leiter," said Nightcrawler, "I would like to be counted out of sewer duty this one time." He had been thinking of something: a plan to lessen one of the X-Men's immediate worries. He wasn't sure if he liked it. In fact, a part of him hated it-but a part of him, he knew, would take a cynical kind of enjoyment in its execution.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Cyclops.

Storm found it difficult to concentrate on Nightcrawler's explanation. Shaw's presence unnerved her too much. In her mind's eye, she could see his face again, hovering above hers, a sole point of light in the darkness. She could feel his breath on her cheek and the muscles of his braced arms against her shoulders. She was buried, but it was all

right because he was there. He was talking to her, calming her as he kept the rocks from crushing her. Her savior.

When she looked at him now, she saw a very different person to the one who had invited her to dinner the previous day. He looked somehow taller, demanding attention by his mere presence. Whereas once she had thought him smug in an oily sort of way, she now felt that he exuded confidence. She was waiting, almost with baited breath, to see what he would do next-and when he caught her gaze, she felt a tingle down her spine. She averted her eyes from his, not quite quickly enough. *Goddess*, she thought, *don't let me become attracted to him*.

And a part of her wondered: was it to Sebastian Shaw the man whom she felt drawn? Or was it to his power? The power that he had offered to share with her.

Despite the situation-despite the deadly danger to a teammate and friend—Shaw's offer had remained uppermost in Ororo's mind. She had thought hard about it during the flight back to New York, trying to visualize herself in Hellfire Club robes, trying to work out what that would mean to her and how it would change her life. It hadn't helped her at all. She still had no idea what she would say to Shaw when he put his question to her again.

She looked at each of her fellow X-Men in turn. She knew that if she unburdened herself to them and sought their counsel, they would understand. But a part of her resisted such disclosure, ashamed of her secret longings, of the weakness she could never completely deny. And anyway, would talking to them really make her decision easier?

Her closest friend on the team was probably Jean Grey, Phoenix.

In other circumstances, she might have felt able to confide in her. But one thing stopped her: a memory of the X-Men's first confrontation with the Hellfire Club and with Shaw himself.

The Black King had allied himself with one Jason Wyngarde, who went by code name of Mastermind. Wyngarde was dead now, a victim of the Legacy Virus. He was no loss to the world. Over a period of months, this twisted little man had manipulated Jean's thoughts, worming his way into her psyche until he had turned her inside-out. He had transformed her, body and soul, into Shaw's first Black Queen, a creature of pure evil.

Or so it had seemed at the time. The X-Men had learned only later that "Jean Grey" had not been Jean Grey at all, but rather a being—a cosmic entity—that had used her as a template for its newfound physical form. Mastermind had unwittingly unleashed the monster known as the Dark Phoenix, and the universe itself had suffered for his mistake.

The real Jean, of course, hadn't had to live through it all. Unlike Ororo, she hadn't had to see her doppelganger standing at Shaw's side in black leather. Still, she was fully aware of the atrocities committed by the Phoenix force in her name and of the Hellfire Club's role in instigating those terrible events. She had also recently been forced to fight Madelyne Pryor, another dark reflection of herself who had ended up in Hellfire garb. Ororo did not wish to dredge up any more painful emotions for her. And even were she to do so, she already knew what her friend's advice to her would be.

Jean would tell her to decline Shaw's offer. She would point out that the Hellfire Club specialized in the corruption of innocents, as she had good reason to know. Much as she respected Ororo's strength, she would fear that the danger of such an alliance to her would outweigh the potential benefits. In her heart, she would be afraid of losing a friend.

Cyclops would agree with her, at least at first—but then he would lay the image of his lover as the Black Queen to one side and look at the situation again.

Scott Summers, for all that he believed in a dream, was a pragmatic man. He accepted that, to achieve anything

worthwhile, it was often necessary to take risks. He would, of course, refute Shaw's accusation that his mentor's goals were unrealistic; however, the suggestion that those goals could best be achieved in a practical way, as if he could create a business plan for world peace, would be enticing to him. If nothing else, Scott would see the advantage of having an X-Man infiltrate one of the Hellfire Club's most powerful Inner Circles. He would share Jean's concerns, but he would also accept Ororo's assurance that she would be careful, that she would not allow herself to be beguiled by its Black King.

Wolverine would react in much the same way, and for the same reasons. It was ironic, thought Ororo, that Logan so often found himself at loggerheads with his team leader. He was the only X-Man who could get under the cool, controlled Cyclops's skin. Perhaps it was because, deep down, Scott knew that they were more alike than he cared to admit.

Conversely, Wolverine's best friend on the team was Nightcrawler, which just went to prove the old adage about opposites attracting. A devout Christian, Kurt Wagner saw no gray areas when it came to the battle between good and evil. In his eyes, the ends rarely justified the means. That wasn't to say he wouldn't empathize with Ororo's dilemma- of course he would-but he would almost certainly opine that it was better to take the Hellfire Club down from the outside than to play Shaw's game.

Iceman would probably agree with him, but Ororo suspected that he would do so more through a youthful naivete, an innocent desire to hold on to a world that had never really existed, than because he shared Kurt's unshakable faith. Was she being unfair to him?

Two for, three against, then. And in Ororo's opinion, Rogue was unlikely to even the tally. Tempted as she might be to side with Cyclops and Wolverine, the Southern X-Man would not be able to forget her own upbringing. Her mother, the shape-changing mutant known as Mystique, had led the

Brotherhood of Evil Mutants and had indoctrinated her daughter into the ethic of that terrorist organization. When Rogue had first encountered the X-Men, she had been fighting against them. It had taken her a long time to grow out of Mystique's shadow and to realize that she had the right and the responsibility to ask questions, to make her own decisions in life. Ororo, as she would be forced to concede, was an adult; still, she was all too aware of the pressures that a manipulator like Shaw could bring to bear upon somebody. She would almost certainly remain undecided.

Perhaps if the Beast were here, he would have made a difference. Ever thoughtful and level-headed, Henry McCoy would have cogitated upon the pros and cons of each side of the debate before offering a considered opinion. Until recently, Ororo might have expected him to be cautious, to advise that it was best to keep away from Shaw and all he represented. But then, until recently, she would hardly have expected him to join forces with the Hellfire Club as he had done. The Beast had evidently decided that such an alliance was justified by the needs of the many, the opportunity to achieve a greater good. And in the end, wasn't this the choice that she too was facing? She had the chance to wield some of Shaw's power in a better cause, to accomplish far more than she ever could with the renegade X-Men.

She wanted that power. She wanted it so much that her heart ached for it. But that was the problem. Ororo was afraid of her desire, her need. She feared that, were it to be nurtured, it might grow until it consumed her. And she couldn't help but suspect that, beneath his mask of civility, Sebastian Shaw was hoping for precisely that.

In the end, she realized, it didn't matter what the other X-Men said to her, what advice they might offer. The decision was hers alone, and they would support her whatever she did. If she chose not to join Shaw, then they would say no more about it; only she would wonder if she had thrown

away a chance to make a real difference. And if she did join him, if she became his White Queen as he had asked, they would accept that too. They would trust her.

The only question was, could she trust herself?

“And so, the poor na’ive insects hurl themselves into the web of the spider.”

Selene’s crystal ball settled back onto its dais as its picture was swallowed by milk-white fog. She rose from her throne and glided across the room to the alcove in which the Beast was suspended. Hank glared at her in silence. When first he had been brought here, he had taunted her with insults and promises that the X-Men would defeat her as they had before. He had taken advantage of his fragile condition and the fact that she needed him alive. But the Black Queen had ways of torturing a man’s soul without endangering his body.

She held his chin in a pale hand and ran her long, red fingernails through his blue fur. “Ah, my dear Doctor McCoy,” she purred, “I know what you are thinking. You act as if subdued, but your eyes are ever searching as your mind plans for an opportunity to reverse our situations.” The Beast said nothing, and a shadow crossed Selene’s face. “I warn you, X-Man, that I will be as quick to punish your dumb insolence as I was your open defiance.”

“I merely considered a vocalization of my motives redundant,” said the Beast, “given that you have already discerned them with laudable accuracy.”

Selene smiled at the compliment. She turned her attention from her captive’s chin to his left hand and spoke in a conversational tone. “Your opportunity will not come, of course.”

“On that point, we shall have to remain in dispute.”

Hank’s throat hurt as he spoke, but he had to admit that he was feeling better than he had done for a while. That wasn’t necessarily a good thing. It had been over twenty hours since his last dose of alien radiation, and the side-

effects were beginning to lessen. The supercell in his body was still mutating, still trying to evolve itself into a match for his affliction, but it could only be hours away from surrendering and being extinguished.

It didn't help that he was secured to the wood-paneled wall of Selene's throne room. His wrists and ankles were securely bound; not by ropes, which he might have been able to break in time, but by wiry tendrils which sprouted from the wood itself. The tendrils were slimy to the touch, and every so often they shifted their grips. He didn't like to ask what they were.

He braced himself now as the tendril around his left wrist extruded something long and sharp from its underside, and punctured his skin. Blood trickled onto Selene's waiting finger, and she smeared it onto her tongue with relish. She had done this twice before, apparently gauging the state of the Beast's health by taste alone. No doubt she had concocted a spell to imbue her with just such an ability, for effect.

"Will it be third time lucky, I wonder?" she mused. She rolled her tongue around her mouth and smacked her lips as if sampling a fine wine.

The Beast realized that he was holding his breath, although he didn't know which outcome he was hoping for. His search for a cure to the Legacy Virus had consumed his life of late. A day ago, he would have sacrificed himself gladly to achieve his aim. It was possible that he might yet do so. But Selene had boasted openly about her plans for such a cure. She had talked of an army of mutants, enslaved to her will because only she would have the power to keep them alive.

He remembered a conversation with Moira MacTaggart just over a week ago, although it seemed a lifetime behind him now. He had insisted that it was better to have a cure exist in the hands of an enemy than to have no cure at all.

At the root of his argument, he realized now, had been his belief in the X-Men. He had lost faith in himself to find a cure unaided—he had begun to fear, even, that no cure was possible—but he had imagined that, if only that hurdle could be overcome, if only a cure could be found somehow, then no villain could keep it from his teammates for long. Now he was no longer so sure.

What if the X-Men couldn't stop Selene this time? She had allied herself with a demon, after all. Hank had caught only a brief glimpse of Blackheart—a vague impression of a dark face and burning eyes looming over him as he had surfaced from a restless doze—but it had been enough to make his skin itch and his fur stand on end. That was what the X-Men had to face if they were to keep Selene from claiming her prize. What if they failed?

He dreaded to think of the future that he might help the Black Queen to create.

He didn't know how to feel, then, when Selene's expression darkened. "It is beginning to seem," she said acidly, "that you are not as able as your reputation suggests."

"If you had not deprived me of further treatment. . ."

"Then the cure would be in the hands of the X-Men and Shaw by now—and what would I profit from that?"

"You're a mutant, Selene," snapped the Beast angrily. "It is in the interests of every one of us to see this disease eradicated!"

Selene's expression softened again as she pursed her scarlet lips in amusement. "Ah, but you see, my friend, my ambitions extend far beyond mere survival. I care nothing for this cure of yours except as a means to an end, a tool to facilitate my conquest of this miserable world." She took Hank's chin in her hand again and grinned, exposing her blood-stained teeth. "Nor, I am sorry to say, will the outcome of your project make any difference to your fate.

Succeed or fail, your usefulness to me will soon be at an end."

Rogue hesitated for a second, crouching on the window sill of a second-story office as her eyes adjusted to the gloom inside. She stepped down onto the deep pile carpet, joining Cyclops and Phoenix; the latter had telekinetically unlocked and opened the window from without before levitating her husband and herself into the building.

Cyclops was already feeling his way along the paneled walls, looking for the secret door that Shaw had told him about. It opened with a soft click, and he led the way into the narrow tunnel beyond it. The trio of X-Men tried to move quietly but quickly all the same. They had little doubt that Selene would have sensed their presence already; by the time her grotesque followers reached this room, they intended to be far away from it.

They must have been directly over the ballroom, because the floor hummed with the sound of music and laughter from below. Rogue smiled as the music was abruptly curtailed and the laughter turned into screams. Nightcrawler's distraction, right on time. She pictured him bouncing around the room, perhaps landing on the heads of a few party guests, teleporting from spot to spot in clouds of sulphurous smoke until nobody could be quite sure how many of him there were. He wouldn't harm anybody, of course, but the guests didn't know that. The appearance of a blue-skinned demon in their midst was causing chaos. It would certainly lessen the number of innocent bystanders in the building, and provide a distraction to boot.

Cyclops navigated his way sure-footedly around a labyrinth of passageways until the X-Men emerged onto a landing. It was lit but deserted, so he hurried across it and found another secret panel in the opposite wall. It opened into the side of a vertical shaft, which extended down into the darkness for as far as Rogue could see; certainly far beyond ground level. Curved metal rungs were set into its side at intervals, but the X-Men could make faster progress without them. Phoenix lowered herself and Cyclops into the depths while Rogue followed under her own power.

Black, scummy water filled the bottom few inches of the shaft. Hovering above it, Cyclops slid back another panel but found only a rock wall behind it. One of Selene's modifications, clearly. With a scowl, he curled up his fingers and operated his visor.

The wall was not thick, and it blew apart beneath an onslaught of red energy. Fragments ricocheted around the confined space of the shaft, but Phoenix's telekinesis ensured that none of the X-Men were hit.

The first thing that struck them as they stepped into a tiny, stonewalled cell was the heat. It was dry and oppressive; it wrapped itself around them and filled their lungs as they breathed. Rogue wrinkled her nose in distaste

at the distinctive odor of brimstone. She found her eyes drawn to a set of manacles, which were tied by chains to a ring bolted into the floor.

There was a small window, but it was barred and shuttered from the far side. The door was made of thick wood; Cyclops took one look at the sturdy lock before he shot it out.

The trio of X-Men emerged into an enormous, dank cavern. Even the light from its wall-mounted braziers could not dispel the shadows in its distant heights and its myriad nooks and corners. Dark alcoves and narrow passageways led off in all directions and at various heights, and Rogue counted another twelve doors. She could hear noises—scratching and skittering—but no matter where she looked, she couldn't see what was causing them. She caught only a few vague, disconcerting blurs of movement with the corners of her eyes.

"I'll say one thing for Selene," she whistled. "She sure knows how to stamp her mark on a property. She's given this whole place a makeover in 'Early Inferno' style."

She heard approaching footsteps and readied herself for action. But the new arrivals were only Wolverine and Iceman; they appeared at the mouth of a passageway some five feet above the ground. They dropped down into the main cavern, and the two groups of X-Men met in its center. Storm and Sebastian Shaw arrived together a moment later, and Nightcrawler materialized beside them, having been guided in telepathically by Phoenix.

"I don't like this," said Wolverine, "not one bit. It's too quiet."

"From what I have heard," said Shaw, "these cells are normally in use."

"I presume nobody ran into trouble on the way here?" asked Phoenix.

Storm shook her head. "It's as if Selene intended us to get this

far.”

“My thinking precisely,” said Cyclops, “but let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“At least not until it bares its teeth at us,” said Nightcrawler.

A flight of crumbling stone steps led up one side of the cavern to a set of huge, metal-studded double doors. “That way?” Cyclops asked Shaw.

“That way,” he confirmed.

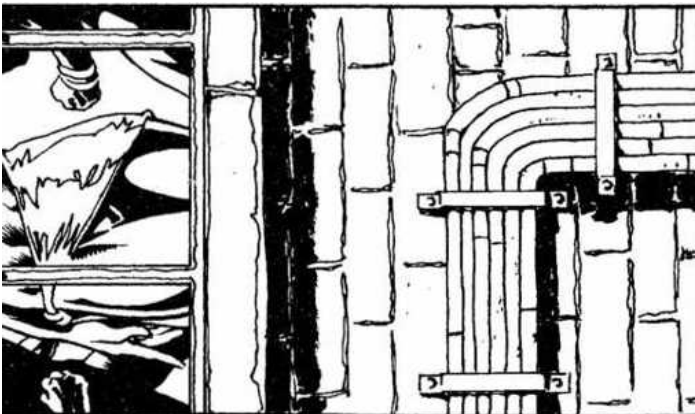
But before anybody could move, a deep rumbling sound reached the X-Men’s ears. The ground vibrated and, for a second, Rogue feared that they were standing at the epicenter of an earthquake. The sound became louder, more savage: it was the clashing and rending of stone, and she realized now what was happening. The openings in the walls were sealing themselves off; stone was flowing like treacle, gray tendrils joining hands across the gaps but hardening as soon as they had formed their new shapes. The wooden cell doors splintered, cracked and popped out of their frames as the apertures behind them were filled. Even Wolverine was not fast enough to escape in time; he made a start towards the nearest exit but stopped himself when he realized that it was futile. Silence returned to the catacombs as the X-Men realized that they were trapped.

And then shapes began to appear in the wall behind them: patches of darker gray, which grew until they had joined together and resolved themselves into a humanoid form. A gigantic figure was pushing its way through the wall itself. Its body could have been made of stone, except that short black spines grew all over it. Longer spines sprouted from its head like petrified hair, and shadows shifted across a face that was featureless but for a pair of smoldering red eyes. Those shadows seemed to come from within rather than without.

The creature drew itself up to its full height. Its head almost scraped the cavern roof, and the tallest of the X-Men

didn't even come up to its knees; it could probably have knocked them all down with one sweep of its spiny tail. Rogue knew that this had to be Selene's demonic consort, Blackheart.

Iceman summed up her feelings perfectly. "We are in big trouble!" he murmured.



PHOENIX TROD with caution as she led Cyclops and Wolverine into an empty basement apartment in Chelsea. Her psi-scans had

_suggested that nobody was waiting for them—but this was a city

of mutants, and those scans had been fooled too many times already. This time, she was relieved to find that they were correct.

The sun was rising, and thin tendrils of cold light pierced the grime on the windows to illuminate a room that had not

been used in months. It had not been vandalized, at least, but it had been abandoned in a hurry. Some items remained on its shelves, but there were several gaps. Phoenix sat down on a two-seater couch, and Wolverine flung his tom mask aside and dropped into a chair. Cyclops remained on his feet, pacing. It had been his idea to take cover for an hour or so; if too many people headed for the rebels' secondary base at once, it would attract attention. Nevertheless, he was not particularly skilled at waiting around.

Jean had been keeping a telepathic trace on Storm, so it was a simple matter to contact her again. *I have found the White Knight*, Ororo reported. *He tells me that 'Location D' is an office in a building opposite Battery Park. His people are under instructions to approach it in groups of two or three over a number of hours.* She supplied an address, which Phoenix repeated out loud for the benefit of her companions. She also promised to pass on the information to the rest of the X-Men, and to meet up with Storm soon.

She settled back against the couch cushions and tried to clear her mind. She closed her eyes and concentrated on reaching outwards, feeling her way around New York City for familiar thought patterns. Storm had given her an approximate location for Nightcrawler and Rogue, but it wasn't until she raised her sights above street level that she was able to get a fix on them. They were on a rooftop in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue. She put them in the picture, but learned that they hadn't seen Iceman since he had left the PATH station ahead of them. Nor had anybody seen Shaw since Wolverine's encounter with him in the tunnel.

She continued her search, but found herself distracted by an argument that had broken out between Cyclops and Wolverine. She tried to ignore it.

"And I'm telling you," growled Wolverine, "in a place like this, your precious rules don't apply. It's 'kill or be killed,' and I'm not gonna get myself skewered by some freak like

Deathstrike because you want to play at being the big blue boy scout as usual.”

“You’d rather we lower ourselves to her level?”

“If that’s what it takes, yeah!”

“So, what’s your plan, Logan? To take a tip from Fitzroy? Find ourselves a fortress, build up an army and fight some squalid little turf war until there’s nobody left in this city?”

“All I’m saying is, we can’t afford to be soft. Selene’s tough enough on her own; she’s damn near unbeatable with Blackheart on her side. We can do without the likes of Fitzroy and Deathstrike getting in the way of what’s got to be done. And since we can’t exactly have them carted off to the Vault, that just leaves one way of getting them out of our hair.”

“I won’t take a life until there’s absolutely no option,” said Cyclops stubbornly.

“Wake up, Summers,” sneered Wolverine. “We passed that point as soon as Selene’s barrier went up. Some time, if not today, we’re gonna have to go back to that witch’s lair. We’re gonna have to fight her, not just for Manhattan but for the whole blamed world. If she wins—if your squeamishness makes the difference—how many people will die then? Do you think your bleeding-heart conscience can to cope with that?”

Jeannie, came Iceman’s voice in Phoenix’s mind, am I glad to hear from you!

Where are you, Bobby? she asked.

23rd and Lexington. I was following one of our mutate friends, but I don’t think she trusted me. She gave me the slip; wriggled away through a sewer grating.

Phoenix repeated the details of the rendezvous point again, not quite able to tune out her husband’s voice: “Blackheart must have shown you something. Back in Selene’s catacombs, when he tried to bring out our dark sides ... what did he show you, Logan?”

“That’s none of your damn business, One-Eye!”

“Whatever it was,” said Cyclops sourly, “you’ve obviously learned nothing from it.”

Phoenix located Shaw at last, but frowned at the discovery that he was with Storm. She wondered why Ororo hadn’t mentioned it. Come to think of it, she had been picking up tension between those two ever since the Beast’s kidnapping. Jean didn’t like to pry, but she was a little hurt that her old friend didn’t wish to confide in her.

“What do you think, Red?” asked Wolverine, snapping her out of her reverie.

It took her a moment to readjust to the physical world. “I can see both your points,” she hedged as she tried to order her thoughts. It wasn’t the answer that either of her teammates were looking for, so she added tactfully: “I think we need more information. Ever since we arrived here, we’ve been on the ropes, reacting to one attack after another. I was wondering earlier about the world outside Manhattan Island. I’d like to see it, maybe track down a few people out there. It might help us to gain a little perspective on the whole situation.” Cyclops rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “That’s feasible, I suppose. As mutants, we should be able to come and go through the barrier as we please.”

“That’s just running away from the problem,” snarled Wolverine. “People inside the barrier are sick and dying while Selene rations the medicine that could save them. They can’t just turn tail and get out of here—and some of them can’t afford to sit around while we decide if we want to dirty our hands or not.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” protested Cyclops.

“It’s just that we’ve lost so many of our friends already,” said Phoenix, “and Selene has had a year to plan for our arrival. We don’t want to make the wrong move.”

“If you want my opinion,” said Wolverine, “the only way to make all this better is to stop it before it starts.”

“You mean—?” began Cyclops.

“Time travel. Back to where we came from.”

Cyclops looked doubtful. “I’m not sure that’s a serious option. We’ve found ways of travelling through time before, but we’ve always agreed that it’s too dangerous. To interfere with our own past is to play with fire, and it might not even do us any good.”

“Who’s talking about our past?” countered Wolverine. “I’m talking about our present.”

“But what if *this* is our present now?”

“I don’t accept that. Selene used her hocus-pocus to zap us into the future—a future that, as far as I’m concerned, ain’t happened yet. We just need to reverse that spell.”

“We can’t be sure we actually traveled through time,” cautioned Cyclops. “It felt more like some kind of suspended animation; like Selene had shunted us into another dimension for a year, only we weren’t aware of it.” He longed to be convinced; Phoenix could feel as much through the psychic link that she and her husband shared. He wanted as much as she did to be able to wipe the slate clean, to put right everything that had gone wrong. He wanted a second chance. But he had to be sure. He had to know that it was the right thing to do.

“Either way,” said Wolverine, “it boils down to the same thing. I ain’t talking about going back and meeting our past selves, changing their lives, because they won’t be around. We’re just taking back the year that’s been stolen from us.”

Scott sat down heavily beside his wife and rested his chin in his hands. “And how do we achieve that? By capturing Selene, I suppose, and forcing her to do as we say?”

Wolverine grinned. “That’s one way, sure-but I reckon I’ve got an easier one.”

Jean realized what he was about to say, and the pair spoke in unison: “Fitzroy!”

This time, it was a simple matter to gain access to Avengers Mansion, A detention coil twitched on the ground

but lacked the energy to rise, and a gun placement swiveled to target the intruder but the gun itself had been destroyed.

Shaw picked his way through the partially collapsed hallway and into the Avengers' meeting room, where their long conference table with its distinctive "A" logo lay shattered. He had been prepared to wait, but the sounds of movement from an adjoining room told him that he wouldn't have to.

He had been right about Fitzroy: he had always been more stubborn than he was practical. Unable to accept the loss of his headquarters, he had risked returning to it. Shaw found the young mutant lying with his head beneath a curved console, cursing under his breath as his attempts to rewire it went slowly. He had made the mistake of stepping out of his suit of bio-armor, which stood to one side like a silent sentry. Without it, his wiry frame, clad in a form-fitting costume of black and white, looked small. Small and insignificant.

Shaw made sure that he was standing between the boy and the armor before he announced his presence with a polite cough. Fitzroy started and banged his head on the console's underside. He shot out from beneath it, and his eyes widened in alarm at the sight of his one-time employer.

Shaw smiled. "Well, well, what am I going to do with you? My White Rook..."

"Not any more," snarled Fitzroy. "Your time has past, old man. You have no power here."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Shaw conversationally. "Are you sure I couldn't crack your skull like an eggshell now that you don't have your technology to hide behind?"

"I have powers of my own, remember. I can take you." Fitzroy's gaze flicked nervously back and forth between Shaw and the armor, undermining his boast.

"One day, perhaps, we shall test that claim. For today, I have not come here to fight you."

"No?"

“No. I am here to propose an alliance.”

Fitzroy sneered openly; he had always been too transparent for his own good. “And what makes you think you have anything to offer me?”

“Perhaps you are content to live as Selene’s lackey. I am offering you far more than that: a partnership. We shall seize the New York Hellfire Club from her. I will be its Black King again, and you-you will be my White King.” Had Shaw not been such a practiced liar, the words would have choked him. He had gained Fitzroy’s reluctant interest, though.

“You’re no match for Selene,” he said doubtfully.

“In this time period, with her servants around her, perhaps not.” Fitzroy’s mouth cracked into a grin. “So, that’s what you want from me. You need my power to create portals through time and space.”

“I wish to return to the past, to the moment from which I was snatched.”

“And your friends in the X-Men?”

“They need not know about this. Selene is overconfident. If we can take her by surprise, I have little doubt that the two of us alone can defeat her. We can take the Legacy Virus cure for ourselves. Imagine what we could do with that power, Fitzroy. We could build a new-a better-Hellfire Club with ourselves at its helm.”

Fitzroy was tempted; Shaw could see his internal struggle reflected in his twitching features. But finally the young mutant shook his head. “I don’t trust you, Shaw. You expect me to believe you’d share your power, once you had taken what you wanted from me?”

Despite himself, Shaw felt his smile broadening. “You impress me, Fitzroy. I never thought I’d say that. You have grown up a little at last.” He hardened his expression. “Regrettably, however, I cannot allow you to refuse me. You will open that portal.”

“For myself, maybe, one day,” laughed Fitzroy. “Yeah, maybe I *will* go back a year and take that cure. I can be the

Black King-but if and when I do that, I won't be taking any passengers with me. And right now, old man, I'm enjoying myself far too much here."

"Then you leave me no option," said Shaw softly, "but to use force."

He made no move to carry out his threat. He waited for his nervous opponent to take the initiative. Fitzroy ran at him, his hands outstretched; he only needed to touch Shaw to begin to drain his life force from him. Shaw, however, struck like lightning, and Fitzroy reeled with the impact of a powerful punch to the head. Shaw pressed his advantage, leaping forward and gripping the front of Fitzroy's tunic. He threw him, spinning him so that he lost his orientation and fell. His head glanced off a console, and blood seeped from the resulting gash.

Shaw stood astride his fallen foe, satisfied with his easy victory. Fitzroy looked up at him groggily, and Shaw was about to speak when he heard a clanking noise from behind him.

He whirled around in time to see that the empty suit of bio-armor had raised its left hand towards him. He was staring down the huge circular barrel of a blaster weapon from the future, and he could see fire flashing in its innards.

He couldn't leap out of the way in time. He was caught in an explosion of searing pain-but more agonizing still was his own disgust at himself for not having seen this coming. He had already been told that Fitzroy had upgraded his armor over the past year; why hadn't he allowed for the possibility that he might be able to control it remotely?

His kinetically-charged body withstood the attack, but he was dangerously weakened. The armor lurched towards him, its long metal claws raised, and he barely staggered out of its way as it made a swipe for his throat. Then Fitzroy reared up in front of him and assailed him with a barrage of furious punches. He was an unthinking fool-and for that at least, Shaw was grateful, as the blows replenished some of his

spent energy. He threw Fitzroy away from him with less force than he would have liked, and turned to face the bio-armor. It raised its blaster again but Shaw moved first, shoulder-charging it. It rocked but remained on its feet. It clamped a metal gauntlet onto his shoulder and he was dismayed to realize that he no longer had the strength to break free. He curled his foot behind its leg and bent all his remaining reserves to the effort of trying to trip it. At first it appeared that he would be unsuccessful-but then, to his surprise and satisfaction, the bio-armor tumbled backwards and crashed to the ground. Shaw almost fell too; he kept his knees from buckling by willpower alone.

While he had been occupied, a new combatant had joined the fray. He had realized some time ago that Tessa-or rather Sage-had followed him from the subway station. Out of curiosity, he had chosen not to challenge her. He had waited for her to show her hand. She must have cut off Fitzroy's psychic connection to his armor. She had also engaged him in physical combat, keeping him from pressing his advantage against his foe. Shaw was interested to see that she had picked up a lot of new moves since her days as his assistant. Unfortunately, Fitzroy denied her the time she needed to concentrate, to strike at him with her mind. Conversely, he was able to use his own mutant abilities to devastating effect.

Sage struggled to break his hold on her, but it was too late. Drained of energy, she passed out, her slim body hanging limply by the wrists until Fitzroy chose to drop her.

By that time, Shaw had crossed the short distance between them, pulled the young mutant's arm up behind his back and looped his own arm around his throat from behind. "Try doing that to me," he snarled in Fitzroy's ear, "and I'll snap your neck like a twig!"

The Technomancer thought hard about that before demonstrating the characteristic lack of courage on which Shaw had been counting. "What do you want?" he squealed.

"A portal," said Shaw.

"To the past?"

"Not yet. There's somewhere else I have to go first. And before you even think about betraying me, boy, think about this: I'll be taking you with me."

He recited an address, and Fitzroy obligingly tore a hole in space for him. The once and future Black King stared into it suspiciously, although he knew that he wouldn't be able to see past the maelstrom of clashing energies which rendered its surface opaque.

He took one final look at the fallen Sage before he stepped through the portal. She was unconscious, but her breathing was regular. She would recover, provided at least that nobody else happened upon her while she was defenseless. She had endangered herself for his sake: a year ago he would have expected such loyalty, but in this time, this place, he hadn't been so sure of it. Perhaps he had misjudged her. But then, the very fact that he couldn't divine her motives was enough to change everything. He had trusted Tessa once, in a way that he had trusted only one other woman in his life. He could do so no longer.

The decision to leave her behind was harder than he could ever have expected. But he made it all the same.

The silence of West 25th Street was broken by the sound of a spluttering starter motor as it failed to jolt a reluctant engine to life. Storm sat in the passenger seat of an abandoned yellow taxicab and watched as the man behind its wheel attempted to turn the ignition again with a short piece of wire. The White Knight clicked his teeth in frustration as his makeshift tool slipped between his fingers, not for the first time.

"Battery Park is downtown, is it not?" said Ororo.

"It is," confirmed the White Knight. He was leaning forward awkwardly in the confined space, straining to reach

for the fallen wire. "Then how is it that I found you heading uptown?"

"I have other business to attend to before I rejoin my group." "And may I inquire as to the nature of that business?"

"You may not," said the White Knight shortly.

"If you still expect me to forge an alliance with you, you will have to be a little more forthcoming than that."

He froze with the wire poised over the ignition again. He turned to look at Ororo, who returned his gaze evenly. "I suppose Wolverine identified me at the station?" he said.

"As did I," she said coolly.

The White Knight nodded to himself as if amused. Then he took hold of the fabric of his white mask and pulled it off over the top of his head. Ororo was not at all surprised to see the face of the rebels' leader revealed. "You have not changed," she said.

Sebastian Shaw smiled. "Oh, my dear Miss Munroe, I have changed far more than you could ever imagine."

"I wondered for a time how you could appear in two places at once," said Ororo. "I arrived at a conclusion this morning. You are the same Sebastian Shaw who fought Selene with us, I believe. You are the same Shaw who arrived in this city, this time period, yesterday." "Indeed. I remember it well."

"And yet those memories are of events which, for you, are a year past."

He inclined his head slightly, accepting the truth of her assertion.

Ororo's voice hardened. "You betrayed us! You came here as the X-Men's ally, but you saw a chance to claim Selene's power for yourself and you took it. You traveled back in time, probably to the very moment at which she sent us away. You abandoned us, Shaw. After all your fine words, your promises, you abandoned me!"

"I can assure you," he said, "that no personal slight was intended." "Is this your idea of trust, then? Is this how you would treat your Lords Cardinal?"

"Let us not forget, my dear, that you never accepted such a role. Your allegiances are still first and foremost to the X-Men, and I could ill afford to involve them in my plans."

"And what were your plans for me, Shaw? Did you think that, given more time, you could have won me around to your way of thinking? Did you imagine I could ever be persuaded to turn my back on my friends, to compromise my ethics?"

"On the contrary, it is that very strength of character that I most admire in you."

Ororo let out a bitter laugh. "I know the true worth of your hollow words now, Shaw."

"Believe me or not," he said, "I have held you in nothing but the utmost regard since you first served on our Inner Circle; a grudging regard at first, I will admit, but a genuine one nonetheless. I regret that I had to leave you behind-but had circumstances been different, had things gone according to my plan, then you would have arrived in this future to find it very different indeed."

"To find you sitting on Selene's throne, no doubt."

"And my offer to you would still have been open," said Shaw quietly.

Ororo stared at him, trying to pierce his inscrutable expression. She considered herself a good judge of character, but something about Shaw dulled those senses. No matter how much her intellect and experience told her he could not be trusted, her instincts—her heart—longed to believe otherwise. She wondered if he made everybody feel this way.

Suddenly, Shaw stiffened and his eyes widened. A pack of six Hellfire Club demons had turned into the road in front of them-and, even at several blocks' distance, they had

seen that the cab was occupied. As they lumbered towards it, Shaw muttered something under his breath and fumbled with his wire again. Ororo stilled his clumsy arm with her left hand as, with her right, she slid a lock pick out of her belt. She reached over and slipped it into the ignition, manipulating it deftly. It took three attempts—but, thanks to her expertise, only a few seconds—for the engine to catch, whereupon Shaw took off the handbrake and stamped hard on the gas pedal.

“I suggest you put on your seatbelt,” he said as Ororo was flung back by the sudden acceleration. She hurried to comply. Shaw had no need of such a safety measure; his mutant ability would protect him from any knocks.

He aimed the car squarely at the demons, his eyes gleaming and his lips curling into a sadistic smile as he picked up speed. They scrambled to get away from him, falling over each other in the process. Ororo winced as the cab’s front wheels bounced over a fallen body to the accompaniment of an unearthly howling and a sickening squelching sound.

A demon had leapt onto the hood and sprawled itself across the windshield. Shaw couldn’t see where he was going, but his demeanor hadn’t changed. He was enjoying this. He slammed on the brakes and threw the steering wheel hard left. The cab’s back tires screeched in protest as they were dragged around in an arc, and the demon squealed too as it was flung into the road. The vehicle had turned a full one hundred and eighty degrees, and Ororo could see the fallen creature pulling itself up in the rearview mirror. Shaw reversed over it.

The four remaining demons had been loping after the cab but they froze now, their faces elongating in dull horror as they saw that it was facing them again. Shaw jerked the stick into neutral and revved the engine, for no reason that Ororo could see other than to taunt them. One of the

demons turned and fled, but the other three dared to come closer.

He drove at them again, veering right to follow two of them as they dived onto the sidewalk. He hit one, ramming the glass door of an office building and driving the startled creature into the narrow lobby before him. The windshield shattered and Ororo threw up her hands to protect herself from flying glass. The hood buckled and steam hissed out from beneath it.

The engine wheezed and groaned but held out. The fifth demon climbed onto the roof of the cab via its trunk, and the sixth tried to follow it. Shaw reversed suddenly and crushed it against the burnt-out shell of an old Dodge on the opposite side of the road. Ororo braced herself against the dashboard as her belt snapped tight across her chest. Shaw spun the wheel again and headed east, but the final demon refused to be dislodged. Ororo started as its claws punctured the roof above her head and started to peel back the metal. She closed her eyes and concentrated, summoning a crosswind that caught it by surprise. It fell past her side window, screaming in anger and frustration.

Shaw drove around Madison Square and stopped the cab on Park Avenue South. In the aftermath of his adrenaline rush, he looked tired and gray, and suddenly Ororo could believe that he really was older-much older-than the Shaw she had arrived here with. He leaned his forehead against the steering wheel, his breathing ragged.

"We should abandon the car," said Ororo softly. "It's too conspicuous."

He shook his head as if it were too great an effort to speak. He made coughing, spluttering sounds as if unable to quite clear his throat. He looked pale. It took him a few seconds to compose himself enough to sit up again. "I have a long distance to travel," he said weakly.

Ororo looked at him suspiciously. "Sebastian," she said, "do you have the Legacy Virus?"

He avoided her gaze. "I have been trying to conceal the symptoms. My followers look to me to give them hope, and I would not wish to see them demoralized."

"How?" she began, but she tailed off, realizing that no words were careful enough.

He answered the unspoken question anyway. "I contracted the disease one year ago. Selene infected me herself. It is in its final stages now. I am near death."

"I'm sorry," said Ororo. It sounded inadequate, but she reminded herself that Shaw's cause was not hopeless. A Legacy cure did exist now, even if it was not yet free for all. "You have not been receiving treatment, have you?" she deduced.

"I will not humble myself before that witch."

"You would rather die than accept her handouts of medicine?" Shaw's eyes flashed. "Count yourself lucky, wind-rider. You have not seen a fraction of what I have had to see. Can you imagine what this past year has been like for me? I crossed the time barrier itself to prevent all this from happening. Selene and her pet demon defeated me. I was infected—but worse still, I was humiliated. I was forced to watch as this world came into existence around me all over again!" "It is little wonder you wish to strike against her as soon as possible."

"I have waited a long time for the X-Men-and my younger self— to return."

"But surely she will have prepared for just such an attack from you?"

Shaw shook his head. "I have ensured that the Black Queen thinks me dead. She is aware of our movement, but she does not appreciate the extent to which we are organized. She will anticipate resistance from the X-Men, of course, but we can still strike earlier and in greater numbers than she expects. We can gain the advantage of surprise over her."

“And then what, Shaw? What happens after you have reclaimed your precious Hellfire Club? You have already demonstrated that your word cannot be believed.”

“I have no taste for Selene’s brand of mischief; you must see that, at least.”

“But you do have a taste for power. You may lower the barrier around Manhattan Island—you may even keep your promise to distribute the Legacy cure—but how are we to be sure that we are not merely exchanging one type of avaricious would-be dictator for another?”

“That, my dear Miss Munroe,” said Shaw coldly, “is your decision to make.”

“Then you leave me with no choice.” Ororo took a deep breath, steeling herself for what had to be said. “A year ago, Shaw, you offered me the post of White Queen in your Inner Circle. I have given the matter much consideration—and I have decided to accept.”

Sebastian Shaw was an expert at disguising his feelings. There was something very satisfying, then, about the expression of incredulity that spread across his face now.

“You need not look so surprised,” said Ororo. “Even after Selene has been usurped, it will be necessary to repair the damage she has done. The Hellfire Club, with its extensive resources, could lead that effort. We could work together to rebuild this city.”

Shaw spoke at last. “No,” he said.

“No?” Ororo’s stomach sank. She had convinced herself that she was making a bargain of necessity, but now she felt as if she had had a lifelong dream crushed.

“Under other circumstances ...” Shaw took her hand in both of his, and his sad eyes suggested that he actually meant what he said and that he wanted, needed, her to believe it. “In a different time, dear lady, I would have been proud to have you stand at my side. We could have been unstoppable, you and I.”

“Then why-?” she began.

He silenced her with a gentle finger to her lips. "Even I cannot always choose my path in life. What I do now, my sweet, strong Ororo, I can only do alone."

"There is no other way?"

"Regrettably not. The course of my future has already been plotted. I know I have done nothing to deserve your trust, Ororo, but I must beg you for it this one time."

They sat in silence, then, for what seemed like an age. Ororo's insides were churning and she felt that there were so many things she ought to say but she couldn't think of a single one of them. In the end, she climbed out of the cab without another word. Shaw didn't spare her a backward glance as he put the battered vehicle into gear and drove it north, away from her.

She didn't move until long after he had disappeared from sight.

And even then, she couldn't explain to herself why she had let him go.

A pack of demons had caught Iceman's scent, and he couldn't shake them off.

He had outpaced them in his traditional manner: by skating along a thick slide of ice, condensing each fresh section out of the air as he reached it. The problem with this was that it left a very clear frozen trail for his pursuers—and they were nothing if not persistent. As he stopped for a breather, they emerged from the shadows again. He frosted the ground beneath their clawed feet to throw them off-balance, but he didn't stop to press his advantage. He was too badly outnumbered, and he remembered all too well how his last solo encounter with Selene's infernal servants had ended.

He had been heading east ever since he had left the PATH station, and now he found himself on FDR Drive. This highway, more than any other, ought to have been bumper to bumper with rush hour traffic, but it was as eerily deserted as the rest of the city. Beyond it, Manhattan Island

gave way to the East River, and Iceman was startled to see that he was a lot closer to Selene's mystical barrier than he had realized. The shifting white shell arced down in front of him and disappeared into the placid water just a few hundred yards offshore.

He smiled as a thought occurred to him. Only mutants could pass through the barrier, right? So, if he went around the *outside* of it rather than the inside, then the demons would be unable to follow him. He could make his journey in safety and reenter the quarantined island at its southern tip, right on top of Battery Park and the rendezvous point.

An angry howl behind him hastened his decision. With a cheery wave and a cry of "See you around, suckers!" Iceman formed another ice slide and propelled himself along it, leaving the perplexed demons standing. He cringed in anticipation as he hurtled towards the barrier, but there was no pain, not even a suggestion of resistance, just a touch of dampness and a slight tingling sensation. It was like sliding into a fog bank. He was enveloped by a white shroud ...

... and as it lifted, he was hit by the cold light of the full winter sun, bright in the eastern sky. He flinched from it, shielding his eyes with one hand, and suddenly he was aware of a gigantic figure above him. It swooped down towards him, and his jaw dropped in alarm as he realized what it was.

It was humanoid, but large enough for its questing fingers to wrap themselves around Bobby Drake's slender body if he let them. It was made of metal, tinted in shades of maroon and light blue. Iceman half-leapt, half-tumbled out of its reach, but a powerful fist shattered his slide like glass and sent him into free fall. The East River filled his field of vision and he braced himself for impact. Instead, he was suddenly jerked upward as if on strings. He rolled over and saw a giant blue hand poised above him. A circular orifice on its palm had slid open, and the air rippled as an invisible tractor beam did its work. He tried to block the

hole, but the robot's other hand emitted a blast of concentrated heat, which melted his ice plug before it was fully formed. His armor was beginning to turn to water; it was all he could do to maintain it, and even this was a losing battle.

It was all over in seconds. The robot's steel fist closed around Iceman's waist, holding him in an unbreakable grip which shattered the top layer of his protective coating. For a second he stared helplessly into its impassive, angular, flesh-toned parody of a face; a face that was all too familiar to him. He had been captured by a Sentinel: a machine built solely for the purpose of tracking down and eliminating mutants.

And then it exhaled a sweet-smelling gas, and the world pulled a slow fade to black.

CUPTEt 18

MS. MUNROE? Ms. Munroe, are you listening to me?"

Ororo Munroe blinked and, for a second, she had no idea _where she was. For some reason, she had been thinking about

the X-Men's battle with the demon Blackheart. It was odd, she thought, that it should have come back to her at this moment and with such startling clarity. She had almost been able to smell the brimstone in Selene's catacombs, feel the fetid air against her cheeks and the stone beneath her feet.

It occurred to her that she couldn't quite recall how the battle had ended. Just for an instant. But that didn't matter now. It was all such a long time ago anyway.

She was sitting behind a polished walnut desk in an executive office on the top floor of the Storm Investments building in New York City. Her desk. Her office. Her building. The exquisite decor was enhanced by a selection of carefully arranged flowers: exotic breeds imported from around the world, some of her favorites. Without her regular

attention and the blessing of her elemental powers, many of them could not have survived in this climate.

A man was seated across the desk from her, regarding her with rheumy eyes and a frown. He was dressed in a neat blue business suit. Ororo started. "I do apologize, Mr. Ambassador," she said, flustered. "My mind must have ... wandered for a moment." She cleared her throat in embarrassment and looked at the papers in front of her, frantically trying to recall the topic of conversation.

"We were discussing the irrigation program?" the dignitary reminded her.

"Ah, yes, yes of course."

He leaned forward urgently, exposing a bald patch on the top of his head. "Ms. Munroe, I can hardly impress upon you enough how important this project is to my country. Overseas aid can only go so far as long as it is targeted at short-term relief. With this grant, our people can become self-sufficient in a matter of years. We can ..."

Ororo had located a money transfer order. She took an elaborate quill pen out of its holder, looked at the form for a moment, then added another zero to the figure upon it and signed her name with a flourish. She slid the form across to the ambassador, whose eyes widened as he saw it. He hardly knew what to say, but Ororo accepted his gushing gratitude with a gracious smile as he backed out of the room, almost trembling with excitement.

She rose and walked across to the window, luxuriating in the feel of her red silk dress against her skin. She basked in the glittering lights of the city, which stretched out below her towards the East River. People teemed along the sidewalks; she couldn't make out their individual details from this height, but she felt an almost proprietorial warmth towards them all. Most of them didn't know it, but she had improved their lives in a thousand small ways.

She had created a better world.

Sebastian Shaw was alone in a white void. It stretched for as far as he could see in all directions, even below him. It looked and felt as if he were standing on thin air.

He knew it couldn't be real. A moment ago, he had been in the catacombs beneath the New York Hellfire Club building, the X-Men at his side. He concentrated, exerting the mental defenses that telepathic allies like Tessa and, in her time, Selene herself had taught him how to build. He pivoted slowly, squinting as if to pierce the blankness and make out the real world beyond it. To his aggravation, he saw nothing.

He completed his circle and recoiled in shock to find Blackheart standing beside him. The demon's charcoal features were recognizable even though he had reduced himself to Shaw's size and clad himself in a dapper black suit. Shaw composed himself, galled at having shown weakness in front of a foe. He suppressed a scowl at the sight of a gold trident pin on Blackheart's tie. Selene had bestowed upon this creature the rank of New York's Black King: a rank that Shaw himself had once held, and would hold again. The fact that Blackheart eschewed the Club's traditions by wearing modern clothing was a further slight against him.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, determined not to show trepidation.

"From you?" rumbled Blackheart. "Nothing that you have not already forfeited."

Shaw smirked mockingly. "I assume you are referring to my immortal soul. Do not insult my intelligence, demon. I accept that you have power here, and over your own physical realm-but I am not superstitious enough to believe that it extends into an afterlife." Blackheart inclined his head, apparently unconcerned. "As you wish. In any case, I choose not to waste my time with such as you; not when I have had delivered into my grasp the souls of seven noble heroes, ripe for the corrupting."

“The X-Men.”

Blackheart extended an upturned hand towards Shaw. His featureless face betrayed no emotion, but Shaw was sure that the red glow of his eyes had intensified. “I thought you might care to accompany me on a guided tour of their nightmares.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He turned and opened a door that wasn’t there, creating a widening crack in the nothingness, which he stepped through. Out of curiosity more than anything, Shaw followed him into a small, brick-walled cell. A shaft of golden sunlight fell through a high, barred window, bringing with it birdsong and the promise of a brighter tomorrow. But the shadows around the light were dark and dank.

Wolverine was chained to the far wall, spread into an X shape by the manacles that bound his wrists and ankles. Cyclops was trying to free him, but the metal resisted his optic blasts.

“It’s no good,” said Wolverine. “You’ve got to get out of here without me.”

“I’m not leaving you,” insisted Cyclops.

“The X-Men’s leader,” observed Blackheart, his words apparently heard by nobody but Shaw himself. “A man who has devoted his life to the pursuit of an impossible dream.”

“A stubborn man,” said Shaw. “Strong-willed.”

“But not incorruptible. Nobody is incorruptible.”

Blackheart moved to Cyclops’s side, and suddenly the X-Man reacted to him as if seeing him for the first time. There was no sign that he could see Shaw, however, and Wolverine simply lolled in his restraints.

“What do you want, Blackheart?” snapped Cyclops, his fingers closing reflexively on the palm controls for his visor.

“I have a proposition for you, Scott Summers.”

“Forget it!”

Blackheart sighed. “So impetuous... you might at least hear what I have to say before you dismiss it.”

"Whatever it is," said Cyclops, "I'm not interested."

"Not even in the fulfillment of your most cherished ambitions; of your mentor's dream?" Blackheart spoke the words casually, but Cyclops's pose changed. He stiffened almost imperceptibly. "I talk of a world in which your kind are recognized as equals, in which they can live their lives openly and freely without fear of persecution. I am talking about eradicating anti-mutant sentiment from the hearts and minds of humanity forever."

"And you'll expect something in return, of course."

"Of course. Is that not fair?"

Cyclops shook his head. "I don't do deals with your kind."

"You will find that a demon's word is his bond."

"But there's always the small print to worry about, isn't there!" "No small print this time," said Blackheart. "No hidden clauses. I will expect full payment in advance for my services. After that, your obligation to me will be at an end."

"What kind of payment?"

"Kill Wolverine!"

Cyclops just stared.

"He is weak," said Blackheart, "chained. You will never have a better chance."

"What makes you think I *want* a chance to commit murder?" spluttered Cyclops.

"Come now." Blackheart laid a hand on the X-Man's shoulder, but it was shaken off before he could guide him into the shaft of sunlight. "Why don't you look out of the window?" the demon purred. "Why don't you look at the world that could be?" Indicating Wolverine, he said, "Do you really imagine that this psychopathic runt could fit into a world like that? It only takes one snake to bring down a paradise."

"So that's your offer, is it?" asked Cyclops hotly. "You'll make my dream come true by slaughtering anyone who might possibly disagree with it?"

"Just one death," said Blackheart. "You have my word on that." "It's one too many."

"Are you deaf or something, Summers?" The interjection came from Wolverine, who suddenly seemed aware of what was happening in front of him. It occurred to Shaw that he probably wasn't real, just a gruesome trapping in a scenario created for his teammate. "Didn't you hear what the man said? This is everything you want, everything we've ever fought for. One life in return for thousands, probably millions, spared."

"It isn't worth the price," said Cyclops obstinately.

"To you, perhaps," said Wolverine scornfully. "You're weak, Summers. You talk the talk all right, but when it comes down to it, you don't want to dirty your pure lily-white hands."

"Think carefully, Scott Summers," said Blackheart. "Few people are offered the chance to wish for world peace. All I ask is one stained soul to amuse me throughout a lonely eternity."

"But you don't mean Wolverine's soul," said Cyclops shrewdly. "You mean mine."

"Indeed I do."

Blackheart turned away then, and beckoned to Shaw to follow him as he walked straight through the wall beside the shackled Wolverine. Shaw lingered, looking at Cyclops, who continued to ignore his presence; he was staring at the window from which the light came, and his expression was torn by painful indecision. He took a step towards the light, but could go no further. He couldn't let himself see what was outside that window.

"If he was asking you to lay down *your* life," his teammate taunted him, "you'd do it like a shot." Cyclops's only reaction was to clench his fists tightly. "Kill me!" bellowed Wolverine. "For God's sake, Summers-for the world's sake-*kill* me!"

Disconcerted, Shaw hurried through the intangible wall, and emerged onto a busy New York street. Blackheart was waiting for him. "He won't do it, you know," said Shaw.

"I know," said Blackheart.

"Then why—?"

"The claiming of a soul is a lengthy process. Seeds must be planted. Scott Summers may not accept my offer now, but in the years to come he will dwell upon his failure to do so. He will wonder if he made the noble choice or merely the craven one. I have made him that little bit more likely to accept a similar, smaller compromise in the future."

"I see." Shaw couldn't help but smile despite himself.

"It is easy for men to forget that the lesser of two evils is still an evil."

A ripple of fear had spread through the shoppers on the sidewalk. Some people gasped in horror, while others had started to run. A young woman raced through Shaw without either seeing or feeling him. The disturbance was centered upon the opening of a narrow alleyway, and he could hear the sounds of a violent battle from within.

Blackheart gestured toward the opening. "Perhaps you would like to see more?" he said.

Ororo didn't remember leaving her office. She didn't remember taking her private elevator down to the street, where her limousine and its chauffeur were waiting. She didn't remember being driven the few blocks uptown to the Hellfire Club building, and she certainly didn't remember walking the familiar route to her suite therein and changing into her elegant white robes. But that was probably because she had done all those things so many times before.

She admired herself in a full-length, gilt-edged mirror, and a smile came to her lips. But it froze there as she was struck by a blade of doubt beneath her breastbone. For a dreadful moment, she felt as if she were floating on the outside of her body looking in, and she was screaming in impotent silence at the sight of what she had become.

"It suits you."

She started at the unexpected voice. Another figure had appeared in the glass beside her: a redheaded woman, dressed in the leather bodice and cloak of the Hellfire Club's Black Queen. Ororo turned to greet her best friend in the world, Jean Grey.

"I only wish I could be as sure," she said.

Jean smiled. "Oh come on Ororo, what would you rather be wearing? Yellow spandex?"

"The X-Men ..." murmured Ororo, and something cold slithered down her spine.

"The X-Men did a lot of good," said Jean, "nobody's denying that. But the time came to move on, and you know it."

"I... I know, but..."

"You're one of the most powerful people on this planet, Ororo. You were worshipped as a goddess! We've both been blessed with incredible abilities, and what did we do? We wasted those gifts on never-ending battles with the likes of Magneto and the Brotherhood of Mutants, and why? What did we gain from it? We never changed anything important."

Ororo nodded thoughtfully. "I remember how frustrating it could be at times."

"Look at how much we've accomplished since we joined the Hellfire Club," said Jean. "I still remember a time when Congress were debating a Mutant Registration Act."

"How could we forget?"

"Today, they're talking about new laws to prevent anti-mutant discrimination in the workplace-and they're likely to be passed." "Because there are mutants in Congress now," said Ororo. She sounded as if she had only just realized that fact, but she wasn't sure why. She had always known it, hadn't she?

"And the Hellfire Club were instrumental in putting them there." "Yes," she said distantly. "Yes, I remember." Another

thought occurred to her, and she frowned. "Although I am not entirely comfortable with some of our methods."

Jean shrugged. "A few dollars in a few back pockets, a few words in the right ears about certain indiscretions ... what difference does it make in the long run?"

"You are saying that the ends justify the means?"

"I'm saying that history will judge us on our results." Jean grinned. "Anyway, it could have been much worse. When Moira MacTaggert ran for election, Sebastian wanted to assassinate her opponent. If not for you, he would have done it."

"I talked him out of it?" Why was it so hard to remember?

"Just like you made him fix a fair market price for the Legacy cure," said Jean. "You make a good team, our White King and Queen: Shaw's ruthlessness tempered by your compassion."

Ororo was becoming more and more confused.

"Sebastian is the ... *White King*?"

"Of course. He deposed Selene, my predecessor as Black Queen. He had to take the opposing color to hers; Hellfire Club rules. Ororo, are you OK? You don't look yourself."

Ororo smiled bravely and tried to shake off her strange mood. "I am fine," she said. "I was just reflecting on how many things have changed for us."

"But for the better, I hope," said Jean.

"I hope so, too."

The alleyway was strewn with the garishly clad bodies of fallen criminals: some of the X-Men's most persistent super-powered foes, mutant or otherwise. Shaw had made it his business to be aware of such people; he could put names to all the masks and to most of the faces beneath them. He was both disturbed and oddly proud to see his own face among them.

Only a few villains remained standing, but they were losing badly. They still outnumbered their single opponent, but he was knocking them down with ridiculous ease. The

teleporting Vanisher was taken out by a kick to his chin; the colossal and reputedly unmovable Blob fell next. A flurry of punches to the head of the Living Pharaoh concluded the uneven combat.

Nightcrawler's yellow eyes glowed with satisfaction as he surveyed the results of his handiwork.

"Kurt Wagner," said Blackheart, unseen and unheard by the object of his scrutiny. "Gentle, kind and chivalrous to a fault. And yet, even within such a man, there lurks a savage."

"I would be impressed," said Shaw, "if I thought he was in control of his actions."

"To an extent, he is. I have only exacerbated his worst emotions: his anger, his arrogance." Blackheart gestured toward the German X-Man with a stony hand. Nightcrawler had drawn a rapier from a scabbard attached to his belt. Its thin blade was stained with old blood. He stepped over two fallen villains and placed his two-toed foot on the chest of another. Shaw was not amused to see that it was his own simulacrum.

"You have defeated us," panted the ersatz Black King, his voice rendered hoarse by the tip of the rapier against his windpipe. "What more do you want?"

"Repent!" said Nightcrawler. "Confess your sins and pray for forgiveness."

"N-never."

"Then I dispatch you to God's judgement, and may He have mercy on your blemished soul." Nightcrawler placed both hands upon the rapier's hilt and drove its blade down hard. His victim's arms and legs thrashed helplessly as he gargled on his own blood. Shaw winced at the sight of his own slaying in effigy.

"I have always thought it a delicious irony," said Blackheart, "that the darkest sins of mortal men are so frequently committed in the name of a benevolent higher power."

“Nevertheless,” said Shaw, “I fail to see how this will serve to corrupt the X-Man. When he returns to his senses, he will be revolted by what you have made him do.”

“I have reminded Kurt Wagner that his own Bible advocates divine retribution, the punishment of the guilty, a crusade against the enemies of his God.” Shaw detected a hint of amusement in the gravelly voice. “That is, if you choose the right passages to believe.” Blackheart clicked his fingers again, and the alleyway began to fade away.

It was replaced by a bedroom, decorated with posters of movie swashbucklers. A wooden crucifix hung above the head of the bed and beside it stood Nightcrawler, whose position and stance hadn’t altered as the world had reshaped itself around him. The demon clicked his fingers, and the X-Man became aware of his surroundings. He sank onto the bed and played nervously with a smaller silver cross, which hung on a chain around his neck.

“To Kurt Wagner, the events we have just seen are already a distant dream, a fading memory. He is in a different world now: a world in which the X-Men’s enemies have either turned to the path of righteousness or perished for their sins. He is wracked with guilt, but that will lessen. He will spend time with friends who would have been killed by those enemies, discover a world in which humanity has not been made paranoid by the actions of a misguided few. He will be treated as a hero, and he will wonder—oh, he will deny it to himself, he will resist the idea, but he *will* wonder if he did the right thing after all.”

Shaw could hear a crowd outside the window. They were chanting Nightcrawler’s name, and cheering for him. The X-Man looked pained: he covered his goblin ears with a pillow, but Shaw wondered how long it would be before the ex-showman succumbed to the lure of fame and adulation. “Another seed planted,” he said with grudging respect. Blackheart didn’t acknowledge the compliment. He left the

room by its door, and Shaw followed him out onto the forbidding surface of an alien planet.

The ground beneath their feet was composed of a fine crimson sand, but they left no tracks in it as they walked. Blackheart took a seat upon a large red rock, the top of which had been flattened by erosion. Standing beside him, Shaw followed his line of sight upwards. At first, he could see nothing. The sky was an inky black, bereft of stars. If this world had a sun at all—if it was not just a barren lump of rock cast adrift in the cosmos—then this face was turned away from it. There was no wind—the sand lay undisturbed—but the air must have been bitterly cold, if only he could feel it. Almost certainly, thought Shaw, the planet possessed no atmosphere, and yet he could breathe.

He waited with studied patience, staring into the frigid depths of infinity—and a minute or so later, the light show began.

It was small at first: a few sparks in a distant corner of the sky, like a fireworks display on the far side of town. But as its unseen source drew closer, it became ever more impressive, until Shaw's field of vision was filled with fiery streaks and swirls of yellow, orange and red. The display followed no pattern, or at least none that he could discern, but its ebbs and flows were a thing of beauty and, although he could hear nothing, he felt as if Creation itself were singing to him. He could have stayed there and watched the pyrotechnics forever. He could have lost himself in their mesmeric wonder. But to do so would have betrayed a weakness. So he tore his gaze away from the warm colors and back to the cold face of his demonic guide.

"I assume you created this scenario for one of the X-Men," he said.

"She is at the heart of the flames," said Blackheart. "She controls them, or so she believes."

"Phoenix," guessed Shaw.

“I have taken a slightly different approach with her.” Blackheart stood, clasped his hands behind his back and began to amble back across the sand as if enjoying an evening stroll. His strides, however, were deceptively long, and Shaw had to make an effort to remain at his side rather than at his heels. The door through which they had come was still there, a white wooden rectangle hanging incongruously in midair.

“Your former associate Madelyne Piyor complicated matters,” the demon continued, “when she confronted her doppelganger with her greatest fear: the fear that she holds within herself the potential for great evil. She hoped to exacerbate that fear, to consume her opponent with it, to drive her to despair. The result of her failure is that Jean Grey is stronger, more sure of herself, than she has ever been. I could have made her fearful again, but I decided that the opposite course of action might bear sweeter fruit.”

They came to a halt in front of the white door. “Nobody lives in this part of the galaxy,” said Blackheart, “and nobody ever will. Jean Grey can unleash her powers without thought of consequence. I have made her as much a slave to her gluttony as Kurt Wagner was to his own baser instincts. She does not control her actions any more than he did, but she will not remember that. She will only recall the intoxicating sensation of release, of channeling forces through her frail human body that could save a universe or lay waste to it.”

“A sweet temptation indeed,” murmured Shaw.

“Rarely have I beheld such power as hers,” said Blackheart, “and yet her subconscious mind represses it. She unlocks her potential in stages only as she feels prepared to cope with each one. Imagine, then, what might happen if the dim recollection of a forbidden pleasure coaxed Jean Grey-unwittingly, of course-into hastening that process.”

Shaw didn't need to imagine it. He had been present when Jason Wyngarde had unleashed the Dark Phoenix, and the memory made him shudder.

"You see, my friend," said Blackheart, "her fears were well justified. Great power always carries with it the potential—the likelihood, I believe—of corruption. If your associate achieved anything, then it was to make Jean Grey try to deny that. In this case, it was she who planted the seeds, and I who have provided the sustenance to make them grow."

The demon opened the door and walked through it, but Shaw lingered a little longer on the dead planet. He was unable to resist glancing back over his shoulder at the burning sky. And in so doing, he saw that a recognizable shape had coalesced out of the flames.

It was the shape of a phoenix.

Ororo must have made her way downstairs to the underground chamber in which the Hellfire Club's Inner Circle met. She recognized the joyless, candlelit surroundings in which her fellow Lords Cardinal had gathered, and the uncomfortable feel of the rigid, straight-backed chair beneath her. She had never liked this dark, dusty room in which dark, dusty deeds took place, and she only half-listened to the droning reports of self-important men as she waited for the latest interminable meeting to end.

From the Black side of the long council table, Jean Grey sent her a telepathic flash of reassurance. She knew that Ororo would rather have been putting the world to rights in a more direct fashion, but that way had been proved ineffective. Much as both women disliked the time-consuming strictures of politics, they had good reason to endure them. They could settle for slow but lasting gains or they could lose everything.

Her gaze was drawn to the strong profile of Sebastian Shaw, who sat to her left, resplendent in his clean, fresh,

white garb. He rewarded her attention with a secret smile.

"I wondered if our White Queen might wish to attend to that matter in person?"

Ororo was suddenly aware that the speaker—an anonymous fat company director who held the post of Black Rook—was looking at her, his eyebrows raised in expectation. She dismissed the sudden bizarre feeling that she had never seen this man before in her life, and tried to remember what he had been saying.

"Given," the Black Rook prompted her, "that she was a member of the X-Men before their unfortunate... demise, and that she is now a respected businesswoman."

It took a second for those words to sink in. Then the world began to spin around Ororo; so much so that she found herself holding on to the table for support. Dimly, through the blood that rushed to her ears, she heard Sebastian attempting to rescue her. "Miss Munroe does not yet feel ready to issue a public statement," he said. "It is still too soon."

But the fat director was not to be put off. "I still think it would be prudent to act now," he said, "to quell the rumors that the X-Men were terrorists—and indeed that the Hellfire Club were instrumental in their downfall."

"If only they had not been so arrogant," sighed a White Bishop—a middle-aged woman—to the far side of Shaw, "so stubbornly sure that they alone occupied the moral high ground."

It was too much. Ororo let out her pain, her confusion, her disbelief in a single explosive cry of "No!" She buried her face in her hands, but she didn't have to look to know that all eyes had turned towards her. She composed herself and rose, not meeting any of those eyes, staring at the wooden tabletop instead. "If you would excuse me," she murmured, "I have had a very trying day and I am not feeling myself. I am going upstairs to my quarters/"

She pushed back her chair and walked stiffly out of the chamber, aware of the heavy silence that followed her. As soon as she was out in the hallway, freed from the scrutiny of her peers, she broke into a run.

Blackheart had guided Shaw through the personal scenarios of another three X-Men.

Rogue had been first; the Black Kings had found her alongside Mystique and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. She had committed appalling crimes and reveled in the heady thrill of being able to get away with them, to take what she wanted from life. When the X-Men had opposed her, she had rushed into combat, laughing, relishing the chance to prove herself. And Blackheart had explained that this was no fabrication, but rather a series of memories. He had plucked them wholesale from Rogue's mind, and left them unchanged.

"Many mortals feel nostalgia for their childhood," he had said. "Mutants, more than most, have reason to yearn for a simpler, happier time. This woman-Rogue, as she now calls herself-has repressed that natural desire. She has buried her past, denying to herself that she could ever have been that person. I thought a small reminder might be in order."

Iceman too had been forced to relive the past; in his case, the day that anti-mutant fascists had taken out their blind hatred on his father. This time, however, Blackheart had allowed him to get home in time, to stop the thugs before they could do serious injury. Except that they had seemed unstoppable. They had refused to stay down, shrugging off whatever he had thrown at them, coming back and hitting his father again and again with their baseball bats, breaking his bones. He had put them down again, harder and harder, and even Shaw had been impressed as this youngster-this most overlooked of the X-Men-had unleashed his full powers, the genetic potential that had rarely been tapped in the real world.

In the end, however, Iceman had had no choice. Blackheart had enhanced his righteous anger just a little- until, for the love of his family, for the life of his father, he had resorted to lethal force. Shaw had left him on his knees on his parents' front lawn at the center of a vast, sprawling translucent ice sculpture. A dozen corpses had been scattered around him, suspended in various twisted positions by the ice. He had been cradling his father's battered but living body, and tears had frozen on his cheeks.

Wolverine, in contrast, had always been prepared to kill when necessary, and so Blackheart had pushed him one step further. He had presented the wildest of the X-Men with a succession of dilemmas in Virtual Reality, the solutions to which were always the same. Wolverine had been happy to extend his claws into Magneto's heart, secure in the knowledge that he was saving the world. He had become no more reticent when required to execute a multitude of villains who didn't make their intentions plain with colorful costumes. He had showed some hesitation when dealing with the fairer sex, but only a little: he had still done what, in his mind, had had to be done. But he had balked at last when faced with a child, a girl no more than three years old. She had riveted him to the spot with her huge, imploring eyes as, with one hand, she had played with the strands of her long, blonde hair.

The other hand had rested on the trigger device of a nuclear weapon.

For a time that, to Wolverine, would seem like an eternity, he had roamed the radioactive wasteland that had once been his world. He had surrendered to his feral instincts, scavenging for food, defending his pitiful lair, because it had been too painful to think, to regret. He had cursed himself a million times over for his hesitation, his weakness. Like his teammates, he would not remember all the details of his dream when he awoke. But in Blackheart's

judgement, he would be marginally less likely to err on the side of caution again.

Shaw had begun to wonder about the fate of one particular X-Man. He had said nothing, but he had begun to suspect that Blackheart was deliberately saving the best show for last. As he finally stepped into an opulent bedchamber, then, he knew who he was likely to find there.

The room was hung with white satin drapes, trimmed with lace. It was decorated with Victorian ornaments and paintings in pristine condition. Storm lay beneath the sheets of a majestic four-poster bed and, as Shaw drew closer, he saw that she was weeping into her white pillow. A familiar trident logo was embroidered upon the pillowcase in gold thread. "I suppose I ought not to be surprised," he said.

"When I looked into Ororo Munroe's soul," said Blackheart, "I saw that she was already engaged in a struggle against temptation. Her heart is divided over your proposal to her. I thought I might mitigate in your favor."

"Why?" asked Shaw suspiciously. "Why assist one of your enemies?"

"More than most men, Sebastian Shaw, you should appreciate that today's enemy could be an ally tomorrow. We have similar goals. It might even be that you are more able to achieve them than my current... partner."

Shaw was flattered but still wary. He was ready to issue a cynical rejoinder when Ororo's eyes flicked open-and, to his surprise, she saw him.

"Sebastian!" she gasped. Sitting up, she hurriedly wiped her face with her hand. White sheets slipped away from a negligee that was near transparent and, being a gentleman, Shaw averted his gaze. Then Ororo said: "I have been waiting all night for you to come to bed!" and he found himself staring at her, nonplussed.

"You have done a commendable job thus far," said Blackheart in his ear. "I offer you the chance to finish it. She

is confused. You need only offer reassurance and she will be yours."

"I was thinking about the X-Men," said Ororo, "wondering if things might have been different if... had I not..." She swallowed, took Shaw's hand and pulled him down to sit on the bed beside her. He perched on its edge, feeling awkward. Only now did he realize that he was no longer wearing his green combat suit, but rather a white jacket and breeches. He looked for his demon guide, but Blackheart had faded into the shadows, leaving only a hint of brimstone in the air.

It would have been so easy to deceive her. In her vulnerable state, she would believe his lies. He could have had his new White Queen. It was what he had planned. So, why did he falter?

Partly, it was because of Blackheart. It was because Shaw felt that his own game had been wrested out of his control, and that the only way to win it now was not to play. But it was also because of her, because of Ororo Munroe. He had been truthful with her about most things. He admired her, respected her strength, and yet here she was, her spirit abused and broken, begging him for validation. She deserved better. He didn't want to win her like this.

He tried to take a hold of himself. Blackheart's methods may have been more obvious than his own subtle brand of manipulation, but did that make them worse? Sebastian Shaw had not built a business empire by refusing to take a prize that sat so easily within his reach.

"Tell me I did the right thing, Sebastian," Ororo pleaded. "Tell me I did not make a grave mistake when I pledged my allegiance to you and to the Hellfire Club."

And for one of the very few times in his life, Shaw didn't know what to say.

CHAPTER 11

SEBASTIAN SHAW WAS TIRED.

He had trudged along for ten blocks with the unconscious body of Trevor Fitzroy slung over his shoulders, ducking out of sight whenever he heard movement. As much as anything else, his constant and unaccustomed state of nervousness was beginning to tell. But he couldn't allow anybody or anything to keep him from his destination. Not this time.

Fitzroy had done as he was told. The portal he had opened from Avengers Mansion had led to the northern tip of Manhattan Island. With only an address to go on—and with neither he nor Shaw having seen his target location—he had not been able to pinpoint it more precisely. However, he had brought them close enough. Perhaps too close, thought Shaw. The butterflies in his stomach refused to settle, and he ached with a mass of contradictory emotions. He scowled, annoyed with himself for feeling like this.

He had attacked Fitzroy from behind, knocking him out with one punch. He would need him again soon. Until then, he didn't intend to take any risks with his treacherous former Rook.

The wrought-iron gates of the cemetery had almost rusted shut. The lawns were overgrown and weeds encroached upon the pathways. Among the headstones, paper-wrapped bunches of dead flowers decayed. If this place suffered from neglect, however, then at least it had been spared the wanton destruction inflicted upon Midtown. Shaw wondered how long it would be before mutant gangs took over the streets here too, pushed northward by the search for sustenance and fresh victims.

Reeva Payge's directions had been vague, and it took him a wearying hour to find the right grave. When he finally set eyes upon it, it was with a mixture of relief and a plunging sensation in his stomach. He let go of Fitzroy, who fell into a heap on the frost-hardened turf.

There was no headstone, just a simple wooden marker. The grave's occupant had been an exceedingly wealthy young man, but his friends had been forced to bury him in secret, in a hurry. Shaw's legs felt weak as he forced them to approach the makeshift memorial. He resisted the urge to kneel, listening instead to his own breathing as he stood and looked at the carved name and dates until time no longer had any meaning to him. Then, at last, he spoke.

"Hello, Shinobi," he said in a husky voice. "Hello, son. It's been a long time."

When Iceman saw the kindly face of Doctor Moira MacTaggart hovering over him, he thought for a blissful instant that he was still in his room beneath the Kree island, that Hank was still alive and everything could still be all right.

He struggled to sit up, not fully awake yet, not even aware of his surroundings. He just wanted reassurance, some confirmation that the events of the past day had been no more than a bad dream. Instead, he felt Moira's hands pressing him down into a threadbare mattress. White walls closed in around him and, aware of an itch around his neck, he felt for it and found something cold and metallic. The memory of his defeat by the Sentinels crashed into his mind, too vivid and painful to have been a simple nightmare.

There were two guards on the door, clad in green and golden armor, armed with blasters.

"Easy, Bobby," said Moira, "you've had a wee bit of a shock. Your body needs time to throw off the effects of the anaesthetic gas."

He was breathing heavily. His throat was dry. His skin was slick with sweat, and he had become dehydrated. He tried to replenish himself by drawing fresh moisture from the atmosphere, but no matter how he tried, nothing happened. It was the collar, he realized, inhibiting his mutant powers. "Where am I?" he croaked.

"In hospital. Don't worry, you're getting the best of care."

He glanced at the guards. "I preferred the old nurses' uniform." "You're under strict quarantine." Moira put a glass of cold water to his lips, and he sipped from it gratefully.

"Just be glad you're not showing any symptoms of the Legacy Virus," she said in a conspiratorial tone, "or they might have killed you before you even reached me." "

'They? Who are 'they'? Who runs this place?"

"The U.S. government."

Of course. It made sense. Iceman's own government had used Sentinels to deal with the "mutant problem" in the past. And if they couldn't reclaim Manhattan Island from Selene, then neither could they ignore the situation there. They had to attempt to contain it, at least.

A memory shook itself loose inside his head. He wasn't sure where it had come from. He was being manhandled out of the back of a large white van, each arm taken by an armored guard, neither of whom seemed to care what they knocked him against or how hard. His head lolled, his neck feeling like a worn-out spring. He was staring at a sky made gray and heavy by the threat of rain, thinking how strange it looked. It took his cotton wool brain several seconds to realize that he had become used to seeing the stark white ceiling that Selene had placed over New York City.

A shape loomed before him: a building, dark and forbidding, its lines drawn harshly across the dull background. He was being carried towards it, his nostrils filling with the scent of rusted iron. The image of a barbed wire fence was imprinted upon his thoughts, but he didn't recall seeing such a thing.

There was a tender spot on the back of his head. Dimly, he recalled hearing, as if from the far end of a long tunnel, one of his guards shouting: “The mutt’s awake!” And that was where the snatch of memory ended, in an explosion of pain and color.

“Great,” he sighed, “so I’m in some kind of internment camp for mutants.”

“Until your trial,” said Moira, “yes.”

“My trial for what? For being born different? And I thought it was bad enough for our kind *inside* the barrier.”

“It’s not what we dreamed of, that’s for sure.”

“Not even close.”

“Selene was sending mutants out from the city, Bobby, to infect people with Legacy. The Sentinels patrol the outside of the barrier to keep it from happening again.”

“You mean they want to keep us penned up inside,” Iceman retorted. “And you, Moira—I can’t believe you’re working with them! What happened to your principles?”

“I’m doing all I can!” Moira’s raised voice drew the attention of the guards. She smiled to reassure them before continuing in a tone that was softer but no less urgent. “I’m the resident doctor here, Bobby. I do my best for everyone who comes into this camp. Most of them are infected, but these days I can prolong their lives by a year or more. So yes, I work for the government—but that doesn’t mean I make their policies for them or condone them. I’m a Legacy sufferer myself; in some eyes, that makes me no better than my patients.”

Bobby’s anger turned to despondency at this reminder of his friend’s condition. “You haven’t found a cure yet?” he asked, although she had already told him the answer.

Moira shook her head. “I’m doing my best. I’ve tried to recreate Hank’s findings-but without the data from the Kree computer, there’s just too much guesswork involved. It’s still my top priority. It’s the only way I can think of to make things better. There are mutants in New York City who don’t

want to be there. If they weren't dependent on Selene to keep their symptoms at bay, they could leave."

"What, and spend their lives in prison?"

"While they're inside the barrier," said Moira, almost pleading, as if trying to convince herself as much as him, "it's easy for the media to paint them as dangerous villains. If they were out here to put their own case, we could convince the world that they're the victims in all this. And if they were no longer infected, the government would find it much harder to justify detaining them. We could start to turn things around."

Bobby clenched his fists in frustration. "If we could only get that cure from Selene..."

"Enough people have tried."

"Maybe," he said, his lower lip protruding stubbornly, "but not the X-Men."

He hadn't realized how tired Moira had looked until hope dawned across her features and washed away the lines of hardship. She glanced over at the guards and lowered her voice again, sounding overcome. "You mean, all seven of you... the X-Men who disappeared a year ago, with Sebastian Shaw? I hardly dared hope... I thought you might be alone ..

Bobby Drake saw a glimmer of Moira's old passionate fire, and it made him smile for the first time since he had arrived in this time period. "We're back, Moira. We're all back!"

Sebastian Shaw was swimming through a sea of painful memories.

He wasn't accustomed to looking back across the forty-plus years of his life; he had survived this long, come this far, by focusing himself upon the future. But now his eyes glazed over until he was no longer aware of the wooden marker before him, of the cemetery itself. He saw only the surly, defiant face of his dead son, heard only the angiy words of days long past. He saw the poor steelworker who

had forged a multi-billion-dollar empire with his bare hands, and he asked himself what it had all been for.

Shaw had only ever loved one woman, and she had died in his arms. He had almost forgotten what it was like to be held, to confide in somebody, to feel the simple warmth of companionship. He had built for himself a world in which such things had no place. His relationships were handled like chess games. He engaged with others only for the purpose of advancing his own position, and he always knew that their eyes were on the grand prize too. Nobody could be trusted. They would all betray him in the end.

For the first time since he had plotted the course of his life in the sweltering heat of a Pennsylvania steel mill, Shaw asked himself if he had taken the right path.

Lost in such anguished thoughts, he failed to hear the approach of his enemies until it was too late.

He was alerted, in the end, by Trevor Fitzroy's death rattle: He must have been stirring from his unconscious state when Lady Deathstrike had impaled his heart upon her adamantium claws. The brash young upstart was no loss, of course, but he took with him Shaw's only hope of escape from this miserable world. He felt the all-too-familiar ache of despair at seeing his plans crushed, and a surge of irrational anger toward Shinobi for delaying him here, for reaching out beyond the grave to frustrate and disappoint him again.

Deathstrike was crouching over Fitzroy's corpse, a euphoric grin on her face. Shaw turned his back to her. Now that he was listening for them, he had heard footsteps behind him. He was not surprised to find himself facing Donald Pierce.

"I didn't think you were the family type, Shaw," sneered the cyborg. He glanced at Shinobi's grave. "Don't worry, I can arrange a father-son reunion."

"Is that the most original threat you can come up with?" asked Shaw mildly.

Pierce scowled. "I don't need threats. I've waited a long time for this moment, Shaw. I'm going to crush the life out of you with my own cybernetic hands."

"You always did lack imagination," said Shaw. He sounded bored, but it was a bluff. He was trying to rile his foe into making mistakes as Fitzroy had done. It would be harder with Pierce, but not impossible. He was strong in physical terms but weak in all important respects. He had allowed himself to become consumed by jealousy and hatred. All Shaw had to do was coax those emotions to the surface.

"You never thought much of me, did you Shaw? You never thought I was good enough for your old boys' club." Shaw shrugged in a deliberately provocative manner. Pierce took two steps closer to him. "You left me to die!"

"I gave you a chance," said Shaw. "You failed me. You weren't good enough."

"I proved myself a better man than you. What have you got now, Shaw? You've lost your precious Hellfire Club; you've lost everything!"

"Rather that," said Shaw, "than play the role of lapdog to that treacherous witch."

Pierce bristled. "I am a Black Bishop, a member of the Inner Circle. We rule this city!"

"You're a liability, Pierce," spat Shaw. "I realized that; Selene will too, in time."

"A pity, then," said Pierce coldly, "that you will not be around to see it."

Shaw had been prepared for the telegraphed attack, but he was distracted by the sudden realization that Deathstrike was immediately behind him. She had sneaked up on him without him hearing her. He moved almost too late: an energy blast from Pierce's eyes sizzled past his ear, and he felt its heat wash over him. He threw himself at his former colleague, bruising his shoulder as he collided with what felt like solid metal, unable to absorb the kinetic energy of his

attack because he had created it himself. Pierce was staggered, but Shaw couldn't unbalance him. The Black Bishop broke his hold and hurled him away. He expected to feel Lady Deathstrike's claws across his back, but she made no such move. This was a personal vendetta for her partner, and she was leaving him to fulfil it. For now.

Pierce bore down upon Shaw: he was reaching for his throat with steel fingers, trying to throttle him. But unable to get a grip on his writhing foe, the frustrated cyborg resorted to using his fists instead. That was just what Shaw had wanted.

In less fraught circumstances, he would have let the blows bounce off him and taunted his ineffectual attacker. Right now, however, he needed every advantage he could get. He reacted as if hurt, hoping that Pierce wouldn't stop to realize the truth. He made a show of pretending to fight back but he was really biding his time, storing the power that was being fed to him. He could feel it crackling in his cells: it almost hurt to keep it contained.

When finally Shaw did strike, it was with a fully-charged uppercut, which cracked Pierce's headset and sent him somersaulting head over heels and skidding across the dry mud on his back. He anticipated Deathstrike's reaction to that. He turned and dropped to his haunches as she sprang at him. Her claws whistled over Shaw's head, but she adjusted her tactics before he could retaliate. She was a more intelligent fighter than Pierce: she denied Shaw the brute force that would only strengthen him, but her claws thrust closer, ever closer, to his chest and he knew that his powers couldn't stop her from cutting out his heart.

He tried to push her away from him, but she used her martial artistry to turn his bodyweight against him. Shaw crashed to the ground, and Deathstrike threw herself upon him. But that was her first mistake. She may have been aware of his abilities intellectually, but in the heat of battle she had expected him to react like anybody else upon being

felled. She had expected him to be winded, to give her that vital instant in which to penetrate his defenses. She learned her folly as her chest was greeted by a punishing kick.

She recovered quickly, but Shaw had time to stand and prepare himself for her next lunge. They grappled again, and her claws stabbed through his purloined combat jacket, between his ribs. He absorbed the kinetic component of the blow, but Deathstrike had four razor-sharp points of adamantium resting against his skin, and she eased them into his flesh. The pain brought tears to his eyes, but he blinked them away and seized her right arm before she could retract it. At last, he could put his superior strength to use. He didn't know if the limb was real or artificial, but he tried to wrench it out of its socket all the same. Deathstrike couldn't break his grip, so she slashed at him with her free hand. Her claws, sapped of their momentum, could not cut deep, but they left parallel marks across Shaw's knuckles.

His left hand was afire, but he clung to his opponent stubbornly. With his right hand, he reached behind her back, took her right shoulder and twisted her around, using her as a shield as Pierce, now balancing groggily on his knees, unleashed another optic blast. His scarred face lengthened in horror as he saw that his partner had taken the brunt of his impetuous attack. With Deathstrike dazed, Shaw flexed his supercharged muscles and snapped her back.

Flinging the broken cyborg aside like a sack of garbage, he turned his attention to his lesser but more hated foe. Pierce ran at him with an incoherent scream but, confident of victory now, Shaw too allowed himself to surrender to his raw emotions. Fitzroy was dead. This miserable half-man had stolen his only chance to reverse his misfortune, to take the source of Selene's power from her, and why? For the sake of some pathetic vendetta; because Donald Pierce had never been able to accept the fact that he wasn't good enough. A hot well bubbled up inside Shaw's chest, only given more heat and force by the Black Bishop's

hydraulically-powered, metal-reinforced punches. Engulfed in a red mist of fury, he lashed out again and again, not caring if his fists impacted with steel or flesh, not caring even as the steel began to crack and the flesh to liquefy beneath his knuckles.

Shaw didn't recall the moment at which Pierce fell. He wasn't consciously aware of pounding a fallen foe. He didn't realize for a time that he was weakening, no longer invigorated by his enemy's blows. It was only as his body discharged its last iota of stolen energy-or perhaps some time after that-that the red mist receded. He could see the gray world around him again, see Pierce's battered corpse at his feet, and he felt cold and sick.

Across the dead silence of the cemetery, he heard the sound of a slow handclap.

The White Knight was walking through the headstones towards him. He had removed his mask, but it took Shaw a moment to accept what was revealed as a consequence: a face that he was more accustomed to seeing reversed in mirrors.

"Bravo!" said the leader of the rebels. "I wasn't sure you could beat both Pierce and Deathstrike alone. Sometimes I forget how driven I once was."

Shaw didn't know how it could be, but he was facing himself—or at least a good facsimile thereof. His mind cycled sluggishly through the possible explanations: could this be a trick on Selene's part? A clone or a shape-shifter?

He didn't want his doppelganger to know that he had the advantage over him-so, instead of the obvious question, the important one, he asked: "How did you find me?"

The White Knight-the other Sebastian Shaw-halted a few feet in front of him. "I came here too," he said, "when I was your age.' I was hurt, and I allowed my emotions to rule me, to divert me from my path. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I wanted to see where my son was buried," snarled Shaw.

"As I recall," said the White Knight smoothly. "But to mourn for an heir who was lost to us a long time before he died, or to dance on

his grave?" He held up a silencing hand. "No, don't bother to say anything, Sebastian. I never did work out the answer to that question." Shaw was beginning to realize what must have happened. "You went back, didn't you?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You made Fitzroy open a portal for you."

His future self inclined his head in confirmation.

"Then ... your past isn't mine. In your past, Deathstrike couldn't have killed Fitzroy."

The White Knight's eyes were dark, and a faint smirk was poised upon his lips. Shaw shouldn't have been surprised that he could read nothing in the older man's face; he had practiced that same inscrutable expression himself.

"Pierce couldn't have found you here," he concluded. "Why would he? We're a long way from the subway station, and nobody could have followed me through Fitzroy's portal."

"I hoped it wouldn't come to this," said the White Knight quietly. "You told Pierce where to find me, didn't you?"

The White Knight smiled a humorless, ironic smile. "I suppose I ought to have known better by now. We never could rely upon that ineffectual madman." He reached inside his clean white jacket and produced a gun. Shaw eyed it warily. Ordinary bullets couldn't harm him, of course: they lost their impetus in the instant that they hit him, and fell to the ground without breaking his skin. But his future self knew that.

"I designed this gun myself," he said. "It fires special pellets: they adhere to their target and inject a payload of thousands of nanoscopic organisms into the blood. Our mutant power can't stop them. Once they're inside your

body, they'll burrow into every one of your cells-and then they'll explode. It's a gruesome but relatively quick death."

Shaw licked his dry lips as his doppelganger leveled the weapon at him. He had to buy time to think. He had never before faced a foe whose abilities, intelligence and ambitions he considered the equal of his own. He thought he might die this time. "You and I are not the same person," he said with cold contempt. "I do not accept it. I would never bow down before the likes of your Black Queen."

It was a guess, but the White Knight's reaction told Shaw that it was right on target. "Once, I believed the same," he said with a heavy sigh. "I thought I could win the game alone, but I have paid a high price for my hubris. My dreams of power are long gone; for the past year, I have done only what it took to survive. I have played the role of the dutiful Black Knight."

"Selene is expecting tonight's attack, isn't she?"

"She orchestrated it through me. It will be her final victory, her chance to rid herself of the remaining opposition to her rule."

"Then why are you here?" cried Shaw. "I was about to leave this time, to fulfil my destiny, to become... you." The words almost stuck in his throat. "You've changed your own history-and if you fire that gun now, you'll kill yourself as surely as you kill me."

"That," said his future self, "is precisely my intention."

He thumbed the safety catch off the gun and squeezed the trigger.

Lady Liberty lay facedown in New York harbor like a drowned woman. Her torch had been shattered as if the dark water had extinguished its flame. Her former pedestal still reached for the sky, but it looked thin and fragile against the harsh white background of the barrier.

The sight made Cyclops ache inside. He almost wanted to cry, if only to let out the pain, but he wasn't sure he could. After all he had been through, he was experiencing a

kind of emotional fatigue. It sapped at his resolve and he knew that, for his team's sake, he had to fight it—because they would probably be feeling the same. He had to inspire them, set them an example, lift their morale. The leader of the X-Men couldn't afford the luxury of feeling.

He shouldn't have let the broken statue draw his attention. He dragged his gaze back to the deserted sidewalk beneath him. He stared through the horizontal slats of the window blinds and tried to penetrate the lengthening shadows. His heart leapt as he heard a clattering sound, but it was only a rusted tin can blown by the gathering wind.

He turned back to the others with a dour expression and a shake of his head. "No sign of anybody else out there."

"It has been almost ten hours since we fled from the subway station," observed Storm.

"And at least two since anyone showed up here," said Wolverine. "It's beginning to look like we're all that made it."

"I still can't find Iceman," reported Phoenix. "I've scanned the entire area between here and 23rd Street and Lexington, where I last had a fix on him. Either he's taken a very long detour or..." She didn't have to complete the sentence. Even Jean Grey couldn't detect a dead mind.

"Widen the search," said Cyclops, "and see if you can find any trace of Sage or Shaw." He glanced at Storm and corrected himself: "Either of the Shaws."

The White Knight's secondary base had turned out to be a seventh-story office suite that had once belonged to an insurance company. It offered an excellent view of the surrounding area, and therefore-assuming a sensible watch system-advance warning of an enemy approach. Cyclops had stationed sentries at the windows accordingly, but he was still worried that anyone unable to fly could too easily be trapped up here by an attack from below. He had

sabotaged the elevators himself and instructed the young mutant Lightshow to create the illusion that the stairway had collapsed. Nobody had questioned his right to give orders: with their leader absent, the would-be rebels had had little to say for themselves. As far as Scott could tell, none of them had combat experience-and though their spirits hadn't been completely crushed by Selene, they were still frightened of her.

The six X-Men had gathered in a small corner office to discuss their next move in private.

"I doubt we'll see the younger Shaw again," said Storm.

Phoenix nodded thoughtfully. "If what he told you is true

"And we've no reason to believe a word he says," put in Wolverine.

"He was being honest with me," said Storm firmly, "I'd stake my life on it."

"If what Shaw told you is true," repeated Phoenix, "then his younger self has probably left this time period by now."

"How?" asked Nightcrawler.

"Fitzroy," grumbled Wolverine.

"So, do you think Shaw took him along for the ride?" asked Rogue. "Because if not, if Fitzroy's still here, then what's to stop us from getting hold of him ourselves?"

Cyclops shook his head. "If we were destined to follow Shaw, I think we'd know by now."

Wolverine sneered. "Bull! Far as I'm concerned, you make your own destiny. I'm not gonna roll over and die just 'cos you think that's what we're supposed to do."

Cyclops tightened his lips and refused to rise to the bait. "The fact remains that, even before Shaw went back to the past, we could already see the effects of what he would do there. But we've seen and heard nothing of our own future selves."

"So, whatever we do," said Storm, "we won't get the opportunity to follow him."

“Unless we fought Selene a year ago and she killed us all,” said Nightcrawler with a shiver.

Rogue groaned. “I hate all this time paradox stuff. It gives me a king-size headache.”

“You’re guessing,” said Wolverine. “We can’t know for sure what’s going to happen.”

“Of course not,” said Cyclops, “and if we do encounter Fitzroy, we should make every effort to capture him alive. But until then, I think our most realistic option is to take down Selene in the here and now. We can worry about the rest later.”

“I agree,” said Phoenix, “but it’s not going to be as easy as all that, is it?”

“Shaw—the White Knight—and Sage said they had a plan,” said Storm.

“But they ain’t here, are they!” said Wolverine. “And I doubt they confided in any of those poor mooks out there.”

“Even if they do show up now,” said Rogue, “can we still trust them? I mean, now that we know who this so-called ‘White Knight’ really is?”

“It’s a good question,” said Cyclops. “Shaw could be planning to lead us all into a trap.”

“Even if he is not,” said Storm, “he has admitted that his goal is to take Selene’s throne for himself. Do we wish to be instrumental in handing him that kind of power?”

Cyclops was surprised that she, of all the X-Men, should have made that point. It hadn’t escaped his notice that Ororo had been distracted of late. She had also spoken up for Shaw on more than one occasion. The pair had spent a lot of time together: Shaw had saved Ororo’s life, and now he had apparently confided some of his secrets in her. Scott knew he ought to trust his teammate, and he didn’t want to invade her privacy, but he would have to start asking questions soon. Unless, as now seemed likely, she was beginning to realize that she didn’t know the erstwhile Black King as well as she had thought she did.

"Do we have a choice?" asked Nightcrawler. "We need his organization."

"If only for their numbers," sighed Cyclops.

Wolverine grinned. "Cannon fodder, you mean?"

"No, Logan, that's not what I meant. Shaw's people can keep the Hellfire Club's demons occupied while we go after the bigger fish." And some of them, Cyclops knew, would die, because they were ill-prepared and ill-equipped for a mission like this. He told himself that they were fighting in a good cause, that they had chosen to follow a dream despite their fears.

"So it's agreed, then?" asked Phoenix. "Siding with Shaw is the lesser of two evils."

"For now, at least," murmured Nightcrawler.

Cyclops looked up as the office door opened. Standing on the threshold was the White Knight: he must have entered the building from its rear, unseen by the sentries. Either that or he had countermanded Scott's instructions to report any sighting of him to the X-Men. He had obviously been in a fight: his expensive suit was disheveled and torn, its white fabric marked with grass stains. He was no longer wearing his white mask. His face was not bruised but it was red from exertion, and his black hair was plastered to his head.

"You have made the right decision," said Sebastian Shaw with quiet confidence.

Wolverine had been perching on the edge of a table; now he got to his feet, glowering at the newcomer, his fingers twitching. "We'll need more'n your word for that, pal."

"Then let me see if I can allay your worries," said Shaw. He gestured toward the outer office. "If you would care to join us, I am about to hold a briefing."

"We're still an X-Man down," said Phoenix. "Iceman hasn't arrived yet."

"And nor has your pet computer," said Rogue, "unless she's with you?"

Shaw's habitual smirk slipped for a second, and a shadow passed across his eyes. "Several of our members are missing, Sage and Iceman among them. We have no alternative, I'm afraid, but to consider them dead. We have work to do."

Iceman strained with all his might, trying to create the tiniest sliver of ice inside his inhibitor collar. If it could melt in there, perhaps

short out the mechanism----But it was no good. It felt as if there

were a hole in his brain, like his captors had cut out an important part of him. They might as well have amputated one of his limbs.

The armored guards raised their blasters as the door slid open, relaxing again as Moira MacTaggert reentered the white room. "I did what I could," she said, sitting on the edge of Bobby's bed. She gave a wistful shrug. "I don't know if it'll do any good."

"It has to," he insisted. "You told your boss-man about the attack on Selene, right?"

"It would have helped if you'd known more details."

"I just know it's going to be some time tonight."

"They've thrown a lot of resources at the barrier already," said Moira. "The Avengers, S.H.I.E.L.D., the Fantastic Four... they've all tried and failed to break through it."

"I know that—and I know it's a long shot, but if they can try again

tonight, just hurl everything they've got at it____At the very least, it's

got to distract Selene. It's got to give our side an advantage. I mean, hasn't it? She can't fight on that many fronts at once, can she?"

"I explained all that to Gyrich," said Moira. "I'm just not sure that... well..."

Bobby pouted. "In his eyes, you mean, the X-Men are no different to Selene."

"Something like that," she said with an apologetic smile. Bobby didn't know how she could be so calm about it. But then, he reminded himself, she had had a year to get used to all this, to accept her own helplessness in the face of a worsening situation. She had probably grown so used to being disappointed that she had had to make herself stop hoping too hard.

She lowered her voice so that the guards wouldn't hear her. "But I spoke to somebody else."

"Who?"

"Let's just say I still have some useful contacts, and I don't mean inside the government. With a bit of luck—and assuming they're in town—the Avengers should be hearing about our little problem within the hour, even if Gyrich won't talk to them himself. Somehow, I can't picture him standing up to Captain America, can you?"

Iceman grinned. "You're a miracle-worker, Moira." But his newfound exuberance was dampened as his thoughts returned to his own

situation. "If only we could get a message to the others---I suppose

there's no point in asking if Gyrich agreed to let me go?"

"I'm sorry, Bobby. All we can do now is wait, and keep our fingers crossed."

Storm stood at the back of the meeting room, watching and listening closely as Sebastian Shaw gave instructions to his ragtag army. He used all the materials to hand, writing names on a whiteboard as he divided his troops into strike teams and displaying plans of the Hellfire Club building on an overhead projector. He conducted a mission briefing as if it were a presentation to a group of bankers, but even Cyclops could find no flaws in his plan.

The rebels-Storm counted thirty in all, plus the unmasked White Knight and the six X-Men-filed towards the staircase

in apprehensive silence. Shaw watched them go with an unreadable expression; Ororo hung back, waiting until only he and she remained in the room. Then, as Shaw made for the door, she blocked his path and eased it shut behind her.

"I am going to ask you a question, Shaw," she said. "And for once, I would like a direct answer. No lies, no obfuscation, just the truth. Do you think you can manage that?"

"For you, dear lady, anything."

"I have met two versions of Sebastian Shaw in this time period. Which are you?"

Shaw smiled to himself as if at some private joke. He avoided Ororo's gaze for a few seconds and, when he looked at her again, his expression was deadly serious. "I am, as you have no doubt surmised, the younger version." He spread his arms and looked down at his white suit. "I am wearing this costume for the first time."

"And what happened to the original White Knight?"

"He was working for Selene," said Shaw grimly.

"That does not answer my question."

"She has been pulling the strings of this so-called rebellion from the start."

Ororo was alarmed. "Then she knows our plans? She will be expecting our attack."

"She is expecting *an* attack," said Shaw. "I have made a few alterations to my... predecessor's tactics. Chief among them is a small matter of timing."

Ororo nodded. "That explains why you were so insistent we strike as soon as possible."

"The Black Queen thinks she has several more hours to prepare," said Shaw. "She has lost many of her Inner Circle, but soon she will have more followers around her, more mutants desperate to do her bidding in return for extending their wretched lives."

"How can we go into battle," said Ororo, "when we cannot trust our own leader?"

Shaw's eyes gleamed with a zeal that she had never seen in them before. "This is our last chance, Ororo-our only chance-to take that witch by surprise. We have to do this!"

And then he seized her shoulders and, inadvertently she was sure, paraphrased his own future self's words to her. The words that he had said just after he had lied to her.

"I need you to trust me, Ororo, just this once. Do you think you can do that?"

cm 12

THE BLACK Queen's crystal ball was relaying the X-Men's torments to her in soft focus. For several minutes now, she had been transfixed-and the Beast had found it just as hard to tear his gaze away from the unsettling pictures. Whether by accident or design-and he suspected the latter-the ball hung in the air at just the right angle for him to see every detail of the scenarios that Blackheart had created for his friends.

Right now, he was looking at an image of Bobby Drake. He looked small and frightened against the austere surroundings of an oak-paneled courtroom, dressed in a black suit two sizes too large for him. He was facing a barrage of hostile questions, stumbling over his words as he tried to defend himself against multiple charges of homicide. He testified that he had acted only in the defense of his father, but nobody wanted to hear it. He was forced to repeat his claim again and again, his frustration boiling over into righteous anger at his unfair treatment. Hank knew that, even as Bobby protested his innocence to the court, so too was he insisting to himself that he had done the right thing.

Selene waved a hand, and the scene was shrouded with mists. When they parted, Bobby Drake had gone and Kurt Wagner stood in his place.

Nightcrawler had become the swashbuckling star of a major Hollywood movie, and a host of familiar faces surrounded him at the lavish premiere. Among them, Hank

recognized John Proudstar: in the real world, he had joined the X-Men at the same time as Kurt and had taken the code name of Thunderbird. He had been killed during one of his first missions. Also present was Illyana Rasputin, the younger sister of sometime X-Man Colossus, whose life had recently been lost to the Legacy Virus. But even though Kurt appeared to be having the time of his life, he wore a distant, troubled expression, and it looked to Hank like was simply going through the motions. He wasn't yet ready to accept this new world.

"If you expect the X-Men to bow to your tawdry theatrics," he said, heartened, "then you have evidently learned little from your past defeats."

Scowling, Selene sent the crystal ball back to its dais with a flick of her fingers. As she stood and glided across the room to her captive, her red lips twisted into a smile again. "Ah, my dear, dear Beast," she cooed, "your health must be improving for you to dare speak to me in such a manner. I must confess, I have almost missed your foolish bravado."

"I expect you will see all the-" Hank began, but the rest of his words were lost to a gasp of pain as Selene's eyes flashed and something twisted inside his head.

"I may let Blackheart have some fun with you too, before I kill you. I wonder what form your dream would take? Perhaps you could learn what it would feel like to have your bestial side take over, your intellect repressed." Hank could feel her cold eyes in his mind as she sought out his greatest fear.

"Or I could become something even more unspeakable, like you," he snarled.

"Enough jollity I" Selene snatched the Beast's left hand, and once again he felt his blood being pricked from his veins by one of the tendrils that held him. She turned away from him so he couldn't see her reaction as she licked the viscous fluid from her fingers.

When she turned back, however, there was no disguising her delight.

"It appears I have underestimated you, my friend," she said. "You will be pleased to hear that your disease has gone into remission-which means that your life's work is complete at last. The super-cell that will cure the Legacy Virus is present in your bloodstream."

Hank had dreamt of this moment for a long time, but he had never pictured it quite like this. He ought to have felt relieved, triumphant even. Instead, he just felt sick.

"Sadly for you," said Selene, "it is of little use to me in there."

"Listen to me, Ororo! It is important that you listen to me."

Sebastian's tone was urgent. He had taken Ororo's arms in a grip like steel, and he was shaking her, his teeth clenched in grim determination. It was the last thing she had expected, and she tried to pull away from him, "You're scaring me, Sebastian. Is something wrong?"

"Everything about this place is wrong."

"I don't understand."

"None of this is real, Ororo. Remember the Hellfire Club. Remember the Beast and Selene and the Legacy Virus. Remember Blackheart!"

"I... I remember. But that was all such a long time ago. Sebastian ..."

"Then how did you escape from him?"

The White Queen stared at her White King blankly. She remembered asking herself the same question a few hours ago. She had dismissed it then as unimportant. But Sebastian Shaw had a talent for finding her weak points. He had always known what she was thinking. He had always been able to turn her life upside-down with words that had to be-but couldn't possibly be-true.

"You didn't escape from Blackheart, Ororo," he persisted. "You're still there, in that cavern beneath the Hellfire Club

building. The X-Men are still there. *I'm* still there. The last few years have been an illusion, played out in a few short minutes. Listen to me!"

He let go of her, and Ororo suddenly realized that she was exposed. She drew the bedclothes up around her shoulders. She was looking at Shaw in a different light now, all the fears and uncertainties of the past returning to haunt her. "I... I don't know if I can trust you ..she stammered as two worlds collided inside her head.

He stood and straightened his white jacket, appearing calmer now that he had begun to get through to her. "If I intended to deceive you, Ororo," he said, "I would have played my part in this scenario as Blackheart planned. It is still my fond hope that you will accept my offer to become my White Queen in reality—but this is not how I wish to achieve that goal."

Ororo felt as if she had been distracted from a pressing problem for a few minutes only for it to return to her with crushing force. She remembered Shaw's offer to her, and she knew now that she had not given him an answer. That was why she had been unable to shake off her nagging doubts, why she had needed somebody to tell her that everything was all right.

She didn't belong here. She hadn't chosen this life. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

She blinked, and suddenly she was back in the cavern, back in her costume, and the Hellfire Club and the White King and Storm Investments were only parts of a fading dream. The rest of the X-Men stood around her, frozen like waxwork figures in battle-ready positions. Of their demon foe, there was no sign.

"Their souls are imprisoned as were ours, on a plane beyond this one."

Storm jumped as Shaw broke the silence. She hadn't realized that he had returned with her. She felt a sudden rush of embarrassment. She had invited him into her bed.

She hadn't been in her right mind then, but the scenario that Blackheart had created for her had not been conjured from nothing, it had been based on her own hopes and fears. The demon had taken her most private dreams and shown them to the very last person who should ever have seen them. She couldn't even look Shaw in the face any more. She felt violated.

"I can see that," she said irritably. She formed a cloud beneath the high roof of the cavern and brought down a shower of rain, blasting the cold water into her teammates' faces with a horizontal wind. It was the quickest way to bring them back to their senses-but the concentrated, violent expression of her powers was also calculated to relieve her frustration.

"I had no choice!" moaned Iceman under his breath as he came round. Wolverine dropped to his haunches and popped his claws as if expecting trouble, relaxing only a little when he saw where he was. Nightcrawler looked heavenward and offered a thankful prayer.

Storm didn't have to explain what had happened. Cyclops's only question as he took in his surroundings anew was: "What happened to Blackheart?"

"He was not here when I awoke," she said.

"Looks like Old Stone-Face has popped out and left us to it," said Rogue. "He probably didn't expect us to break out of his little psychodramas so quickly."

"I don't like it," said Wolverine. "Smells like a trap to me."

"He wouldn't be the first big bad villain to underestimate the X-Men, sugar."

"Either way," said Cyclops, "the Beast's situation leaves us with no choice. Trap or no trap, we have to keep going until we reach Selene's throne room."

He set off at a run, leading the way up the stone steps which, according to Shaw, had once provided access to the lowest level of the Hellfire Club building proper. The door at their head had been destroyed now, of course, and a stone wall stood in its place.

For the X-Men, however, it was hardly an insurmountable problem.

As Cyclops set about the barrier with his optic blasts, he was unaware that he was being observed. Selene's crystal ball had leapt from its dais in response to a signal that the Beast had neither seen nor heard, shooting across the throne room to slap into the Black Queen's gloved hand. Captor and captive alike had watched in silence as Shaw had revealed the truth to Storm, whereupon the scene had changed and they had witnessed the X-Men's awakening.

The Beast's heart soared. "Reluctant as I am to resort to recriminations," he said, "I did attempt to impress upon you the likelihood of this contingency." It was no longer just a matter of expressing "foolish bravado" as Selene had put it; this was one thing he could still do to aid his teammates. The longer he could keep her distracted, angry with him, the less time she would have to spend preparing for their arrival. He even resumed his struggles against the tendrils at his wrists and ankles. He was still woozy from his radiation treatment, but the knowledge that his system was finally winning its own fight against the Legacy Virus was a powerful tonic. He could feel his strength returning.

Selene did not react to his taunt. She dismissed the crystal ball and remained standing with her back to her

prisoner for several long seconds. When she did turn to face him again, he knew that something was wrong. Far from looking disappointed or angered by her setback, the Black Queen's face was alight with glee.

"My dear, dear Doctor McCoy," she said, "how willfully you contrive to misunderstand. I have not even the heart to punish the insolence of one so naive, so blissfully unaware of the nature of things. Do you truly believe that a handful of pitiful mortals could outwit the offspring of the Prince of Lies himself?"

"I believe your diabolical partner was met with stronger resistance than he had anticipated. Whoever could have guessed that our friend Shaw has a conscience after all?"

Selene laughed contemptuously. "I know my old Black King as well as anybody," she claimed, "and he acted precisely as my new King and I expected he would."

The Beast said nothing. He was pulling so hard against his bonds that the muscles in his arms and legs ached, but it was to no avail.

"Blackheart's intention was not to corrupt Shaw," said Selene, "for his soul is, after all, already stained beyond all hope of redemption. Even his decision to tell Storm the truth was motivated by a selfish desire to assert his

independence from us. Rather, we have given an enemy cause to doubt his own motives, his very self. We have

weakened his resolve. I have control of the New York branch of the Hellfire Club; Shaw will not rest until he has taken it back from me. Today, my consort has lessened the possibility of such an outcome." "Why not just kill him if he's such a threat to you?"

"Oh, I have not finished with Sebastian Shaw. Not yet."

As she spoke, Selene walked into another alcove. She emerged with a large glass container, which she placed on the stone floor at the Beast's feet. He estimated that it would hold about a gallon of liquid, and he shuddered as he

realized what it had to be for. He tried to keep his captor engaged in conversation, to delay her.

“Nevertheless, he did insert the proverbial spanner into your plans for Storm.”

“On the contrary,” said Selene, “Ororo Munroe now believes that there is a noble side to Sebastian Shaw’s nature. She is closer than ever before to accepting his proposal. Your teammate is strong-willed, my friend: she could never have been brainwashed into joining Shaw’s Inner Circle, at least not for long. How much more satisfying, then, to see her make that decision of her own free will? How sweet the taste of a heroic soul thus compromised?”

Hank was still trying to think of an answer to that when he felt a prickly pain all over the back of his body. The tendrils were extending their needles-or thorns, or whatever they were-into his skin again, but not just into his wrist this time. He gasped, and tried to arch himself away from them. He felt as if he had lain down on a bed of nails. And now he could feel the needles drawing blood, draining his newly restored vitality from him.

Selene pressed her fingers against the wall beside Hank’s shoulder. He couldn’t see what she was doing, but when she pulled her hand away she was holding a length of tendril, which became a loop as she teased it towards her. Then she leaned forward and, in one quick, feral motion, tore the squirming tentacle apart with her teeth. Blood gushed from both ends of the ruptured pipeline, and she gave them each a savage yank, pulling them further out of the wall until they reached down into the glass container. The Beast watched in numb horror as his own blood was pumped sluggishly into the receptacle. It was filling at an alarming rate.

“I must apologize for my unseemly haste,” Selene smirked, her lips and chin red, “but as I’m sure you’ll appreciate, this precious fluid has to be placed in a refrigeration unit as soon as possible. After all, we wouldn’t

want your super-cell to conclude its work and extinguish itself before I can isolate and duplicate it. Not after all your hard work."

"That cure belongs to Mankind, Selene," insisted the Beast through gritted teeth.

The Black Queen laughed. "You are very much mistaken. The cure belongs to me now-and to ensure that it remains that way, I will of course be draining *all* the blood from your malformed body." She nuzzled Hank's chin with her knuckles, almost affectionately. "Oh, I know that, strictly speaking, I don't need it all-a small sample ought to be enough for my purposes-but you see, my dear Doctor, I am a hoarder by nature. If I want something, then I'm afraid I have to be the only person who has it-and I have to have it all."

"You're psychotic!" spat the Beast.

"I knew you'd understand," purred Selene.

The stone wall was thick, but it began to crack under the force of Cyclops's repeated blasts. Storm stood a little way behind her comrades, lost in silent contemplation. She was dwelling upon the dream that Blackheart had created for her, but the precise details of it were proving ever more elusive. She chased them around her memory, but they twisted and flickered and slipped through her mental grasp like shadows.

She did remember that the dream had been full of warmth: not only the physical warmth of a well-heated, sumptuous Hellfire Club apartment, but the more satisfying inner glow of achievement, of knowing that her actions had improved lives. And then there had been a more intimate warmth, the warmth that came from sharing her bed with another person.

In contrast, real life felt cold. Despite the close heat of the catacombs, she felt as if her skin were breaking out in goose pimples. She was worried for her teammates, about what Selene might have planned for them. She feared that

the Beast might already be dead. And she dreaded the prospect of a Legacy Virus cure under the sole control of the Black Queen.

For as long as she had been with the X-Men, it had been like this. Professor Xavier dreamt of a better world-but the wOuld-be architects of that dream were forever on the defensive, forced to react to new and deadlier threats. They always seemed to be fighting somebody, but rarely did they gain from it; the best they could hope for was to safeguard what they already had. Sometimes, they couldn't even do that. Sometimes, a friend fell or the public were given fresh reason to distrust those who weren't like them. Sometimes, they couldn't even stop a madman from achieving his goal; a madman like Stiyfe, the mutant from the future who had unleashed the Legacy Virus upon his own past in the first place.

There had to be a better way than this.

Ororo shook herself out of her introspection, sensing Shaw's eyes upon her. She returned his concerned look with a weak smile. She still felt a little awkward around him, although she could no longer remember why. All she did know was that he had passed up the opportunity to take what he wanted from her. He had done the honorable thing, and saved her again.

And then there was no more time for thinking. Rogue stepped forward to complete the job that Cyclops had begun; she shattered the weakened obstruction with three resounding blows. Storm brought up the rear as the X-Men clambered over the wreckage to find themselves at one end of a long, narrow hallway. The floor was carpeted and the walls were hung with paintings. Ororo saw four closed doors and was alarmed to realize that she knew what lay behind each of them, even though she had never been through them. Thanks to Blackheart, this building felt like a home to her. But it was a home that had been invaded.

At the far end of the hallway, a spiral staircase snaked upwards. Waiting at its foot were eight demon creatures in Hellfire Club uniforms.

Storm summoned and redirected the air currents from the cavern behind her, and a fierce wind whistled past the X-Men. It gained strength as it rushed along the passageway and picked up Wolverine, who was already racing to the attack. He allowed himself to be carried by it and approached his foes like a cannonball, claws outstretched. Some of the demons came forward to meet him, but the wind had acquired the force of a hurricane and it scattered them like tenpins. They tried to pick themselves up, but Wolverine was already in their midst. By the time his teammates had reached him, all but two of the demons were back on the floor, leaking black blood from deep wounds. Cyclops felled the first with an optic blast, while Phoenix picked up the second telekinetically and smashed it into a wall.

The X-Men mounted the staircase almost without missing a footstep. More demons were charging down towards them, and Cyclops's eye-beam struck out again and again. The few creatures that were able to get past it were dispatched by Wolverine's claws or Rogue's fists—and any demon which tried to throw itself at the advancing heroes from one of the higher balconies found its direction suddenly and painfully reversed by Storm or Phoenix.

They attained two more floors in this fashion, but their foes seemed numberless and, although they weren't strong, they were extremely persistent. They reached the highest basement level—the one on which Selene's throne room was located—but once there, they found that they could go no further. A veritable horde of demons had been lying in wait for them, and they attacked from every direction, too many for even the X-Men with their varied powers to repel. Within seconds, they were engulfed.

Leering, yellowed faces pressed in around Storm, and she could no longer see past them to aim a lightning bolt or direct a strong wind. Fortunately, the X-Men had been trained not to rely solely upon their mutant abilities, and Ororo was particularly skilled in hand-to-hand combat. The close quarters even worked partially to her advantage as she could use her attackers as weapons against each other, felling several of them at a time.

At Phoenix's telepathic prompt, the X-Men fought their way to each other and formed themselves into a circle, their backs together so that they couldn't be struck from behind. Try as they might, the demons couldn't get past their ring of defense; they hammered and kicked and scratched and bit at their enemies, but the X-Men remained standing and returned each blow with greater force. More demons fell, cut by adamantium claws, beaten down by telekinesis or blasted with ice darts, and their ranks began to thin out at last. Storm knew it was only a matter of time before the vile creatures were defeated.

Time, unfortunately, was the one thing they didn't have.

"My demons are no match for the X-Men, of course," said Selene. "Your friends have proved their capabilities—not to mention their sheer determination—on many occasions."

"Then ... why... ?" croaked the Beast.

"Oh, we wouldn't want to give them any more cause for suspicion, now would we? I have to give the impression, at least, that I am trying to keep them away from my sanctum. I would hate them to know just how eagerly I anticipate their arrival."

"Such confidence ... has been your... downfall... before ..." "You talk as if the outcome of this encounter is in doubt. Believe my, my dear Beast, it is not. When the X-Men reach this room, they will activate the magical glyphs with which I have marked the door. They will be transported one year into the future." Selene smiled. "Oh, I could have chosen glyphs that would have exploded in their faces—but you

self-appointed do-gooders have an unfortunate reputation for being hard to kill. And my Black King desired another chance to stain their oh-so-pure, noble souls.”

She paused as if awaiting an answer, but the Beast was too weak to give one.

“Of course,” she said in a softer, mocking tone, “even if I was wrong, it would be of little consequence to you, my friend. Your teammates are already too late to save your life.”

As an X-Man, the Beast was used to fighting against impossible odds. He had no intention of accepting his death until it had become an immutable fact. But he had to admit to himself that, short of a miracle, Selene was almost certainly right. He felt light-headed and empty, and it was an immense effort just to keep his eyelids raised. Unable to concentrate, he had no option but to follow his thoughts as they drifted back to happier times. He smiled to himself as he recalled his first day at Professor Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters, his nights on the town with Bobby and the acceptance he had found with the Avengers.

But the good memories were blotted out by the specter of the Legacy Virus, by the interminable days and nights he had spent working to wipe its blight from the world. More than anything else, Hank felt cheated. Even if the X-Men couldn’t save him, they would not stop fighting. They would take his blood, his cure, out of Selene’s hands if they could. But he would never know the outcome of that struggle. He would die without knowing what his own legacy to the world would be: whether he had eased the suffering of millions as he had intended or simply made the Black Queen more powerful.

Selene’s voice stirred him from his half-awake dreams. “I believe your friends have arrived,” she said. “You might even be able to say goodbye to them if you are quick enough.”

The door burst open, and Hank felt a momentary surge of elation as the first of the X-Men, Cyclops, raced into the throne room. Wolverine was right behind him, and the Beast could see Rogue and Phoenix at his heels.

Before any of them had taken three steps, however, a chill wind whipped through Hank McCoy's fur and the raw scent of ozone hit his nostrils.

There was a sudden flash of black light...

HI IMHO

A CROWD OF mutants had gathered outside the Hellfire Club building on Fifth Avenue. They made for a pathetic assemblage—in their filthy rags, bowed and defeated, their eyes mostly downcast. They jostled quietly for the best positions, their sleeves rolled up in anticipation, and the weakest of them were pushed out into the road and up to the edge of Central Park.

Selene's demon agents moved among them, carrying syringes from which they injected single measures of the Legacy Virus cure. The mutants shuffled and raised their hands in the hope that they would find favor, that their pains would be eased for a few days. Inevitably, some of them were overlooked. Some of the demons delighted in holding out full syringes in front of beseeching eyes and then squirting their transparent contents wastefully into the air before moving on. More than one mutant groveled in the dirt, trying to lick up the remnants of the life-prolonging elixir before they seeped into the concrete.

But nobody dared to complain. Nobody even dared to offer a plea. The mutants accepted their lot, because to do otherwise would have drawn the attention of the Black Queen.

Selene stood in the doorway of her mansion house at the head of a short flight of steps, framed by a stone archway

into which were set two trident symbols. And she drank in the suffering of her loyal subjects.

She probably shouldn't have been here. She had other matters to attend to. Her Black Knight would be leading her remaining enemies to her soon. But she enjoyed this so much: what use to her was power over others if she couldn't at least witness the demonstration of it?

And after tonight, after she had turned her sights beyond the restrictive confines of Manhattan Island, she might have little time for this small pleasure.

She raised a hand suddenly and flared her nostrils in mock anger—and although she had cast no spell, an electrical aura crackled through the crowd and all activity ceased. Selene walked slowly down three steps, savoring the attention, and fixed her gaze upon a skinny mutate whose flesh practically hung from his skeleton. He had just caught the attention of a demon, and a needle was poised above his bare arm. But the transcendent joy in his expression froze and turned to dread as his mistress pointed a long fingernail at him.

"This creature here," said Selene coldly, "has taken more than his ration. He has been injected once today; now he thinks to steal somebody else's share."

The mutate was almost in tears. He was shaking his head vigorously, his lips forming words that emerged as a barely audible squeal. "No, mistress, I didn't, no, please ..."

Selene clicked her fingers dispassionately, and her demons closed in around the trembling wretch. He found his voice at last and screamed as he disappeared beneath a pile of their foul, decaying bodies. The other mutants shrank away as far as they could from the grisly scene: even those who might have felt sympathy for their fellow didn't wish to share his fate.

The demons withdrew, leaving a tom and twisted corpse on the ground. They would toss it into a dumpster later, some distance away; Selene liked to keep the area around

her home clean. For now, at a nod from her, the weekly ministrations were resumed.

She had no reason at all to believe that the mutate had been guilty of the crime of which she had accused him. She had picked him out of the crowd at random. It didn't matter: his example would prevent others from becoming bold, from taking enough of the cure to rid themselves of their affliction altogether. She might not be able to oversee future handouts in person, but her presence would be felt nonetheless.

She returned to her doorway and watched impassively for a minute longer, until she felt a sudden tingle at the base of her skull. A psychic alarm signal. With a frown, she turned her thoughts inward and confirmed her suspicions. Two enemy groups, over thirty mutants in all, were moving fast—some faster than others—through the sewers beneath her building.

The rebels' attack had begun early.

She sighed. Irritating as this turn of events might be, it wasn't entirely unexpected. She had always known that Shaw might betray her, or that his plans—the plans that she had approved—might be overridden by the X-Men. It was against just such an eventuality that she had erected another mystical barrier inside the first, extending three blocks in each direction from her mansion house. This second barrier was invisible and intangible to all—but it recognized the heat signatures of known dissidents and alerted its creator to their proximity.

The two rebel groups had crossed the barrier at the same time, which suggested that they were fully aware of its presence and had coordinated their approaches.

Selene narrowed her eyes and surveyed her surroundings. Three blocks downtown, light glinted off something on a rooftop. She glared in its direction for a few seconds, unable to discern anything more. Realizing that she was frowning, she rearranged her features into a more

confident expression. Then she whirled around and swept back into the Hellfire Club building with a deliberately unhurried gait.

The rebels were immediately below her now, but Selene wasn't worried. Her Black King was aware of their presence too-and she could sense that he had already intercepted them.

Wolverine felt an overwhelming sense of déjà vu as he waded through the familiar labyrinth of New York City's sewer system with Rogue and fourteen of the White Knight's mutant followers behind him. He couldn't help but remember how the X-Men's last battle in Selene's catacombs had turned out, and the thought made the hairs on his back stand on end.

When he estimated that he was within a few feet of Selene's mystical sensors, he held up a hand behind him, wincing as his team splashed to an excessively noisy halt. From far above him, Phoenix was maintaining a telepathic link between the X-Men, and Wolverine let her know that he was in position. A minute or so later, he received confirmation that Cyclops's team were also ready. He dropped into a crouch and snapped: "OK, let's go!"

He heard Rogue's voice behind him: "I hope you're ready for this, sugar!" And then, her full weight struck him in the back and propelled him into the air. He caught his breath as the tunnel walls streaked past him; his feet were dangling over black water as he hung by his armpits in his teammate's grasp. He was barely aware of running footsteps receding behind him as the other mutants obeyed instructions and followed as quickly as they could. It didn't matter how much noise they made now; Selene already knew they were coming.

They took a sharp right turn into a rough-hewn passageway, and then into another. Thankfully, the White Knight's information proved accurate—the layout of Selene's catacombs hadn't changed—and they emerged

into a large cavern, just as Wolverine had a year ago. Less than a minute had passed since he and Rogue had tripped the alarm— but to his dismay, Blackheart was waiting for them.

“Is this the best opposition your leaders can muster? The psychotic killer and the thug? Your souls are practically mine already.” The demon was in his “stone monster” form, almost as tall as the cave itself, but Wolverine didn’t let that faze him. The plan was to hit him hard and fast, and that was exactly what the two X-Men did.

Rogue delivered what Wolverine liked to call a “fastball special,” he tucked his arms and legs into his stomach as she hurled him at Blackheart’s head, unfolding himself at the last instant to aim his claws at the Black King’s eyes. Blackheart flinched away from him, which if nothing else was a telling-and in its own small way, satisfying—reaction. It was a reaction, unfortunately, which also left Wolverine in free-fall. As he tumbled past Blackheart’s left shoulder, he reached out and caught hold of it, almost wrenching his own arm out of its socket. Looking up, he saw the demon’s right hand poised above him, about to swat him-but at that moment, Rogue slammed into Blackheart’s ankle.

If she had hoped to fell him, then her effort was in vain. The demon’s leg was like a granite pillar, and she rebounded from it with a pained expression. Ignoring his own pain, Wolverine hauled himself up, unable to shake the impression that he was attempting to climb a mountain during an earthquake. Far below him, Blackheart’s thick, spiny tail swung around and swiped the still-dazed Rogue off her feet.

Wolverine had dragged himself onto Blackheart’s broad shoulder, and he leapt at the demon’s face again. But a giant hand plucked him out of midair, and he was hurled across the cavern to collide first with a rock wall and then with the ground. Had his bones not been laced with adamantium, his spine would surely have been shattered;

as it was, he was badly bruised and the breath had been knocked out of him. His healing factor needed time to do its work—but Blackheart was already towering over him again, and he had to force his protesting muscles to move. He rolled aside as a blast of energy exploded from the demon's fingertips. It narrowly missed him, but he wasn't sure he could avoid a second such attack.

"Ah," rumbled Blackheart, turning away from the fallen X-Man, "at last, this game promises to become worthy of my time."

Wolverine's team of resistance fighters had arrived. Almost simultaneously, Cyclops and Storm had burst into the cavern from the opposite side, at the head of a second team. In a moment, the area was filled with heaving bodies; some of the White Knight's followers were attacking Blackheart directly, while others were simply running interference. No one of them was a match for the demon, but the plan was to confuse him with their numbers, to keep him off-balance and unable to take the initiative.

To this end, a group of four mutants raced up the stone staircase that led to the Hellfire Club's basement levels and their real target, Selene. Blackheart saw them before they got halfway, and collapsed the stairs with a wave of his hand—but the mutants had been chosen for their flying abilities, and they kept on going. As Blackheart concentrated on forming some of the debris from the staircase into a barrier between them and the door, he left himself exposed to a lightning strike from Storm. It seemed to hurt him, but he shook off its effects in a second, and there was a gleeful tone in his gravelly voice. "Come then," he bellowed, "pit your mortal powers against the son of Mephisto—but be there thirty or three hundred of you, it will make no difference in the end. Mine is the power of evil itself; the power of every sin committed or malicious thought harbored upon this tainted world. My strength is limitless."

He was probably right, thought Wolverine. But then, it wasn't necessary for the X-Men and the rebels to defeat Blackheart; they simply had to keep him occupied while their third and final strike team did its job.

He had found his second wind now, and he was about to rejoin the battle when a familiar blue and yellow-clad figure emerged from the chaos in front of him. At the last possible moment, he sensed that something was wrong. Cyclops triggered his visor, and an optic blast pounded into the ground where his teammate had just been standing. "You're pointing those eyes in the wrong direction, mister!"

"You heard what Blackheart said." Cyclops's jaw was set determinedly, and he unleashed another blast, which Wolverine only just managed to evade. "This is all your fault. You and everybody else like you. Every time you lose control, every time you take a life, you feed him. You increase his power." His voice was rising in pitch, becoming almost hysterical.

"You're in my way, Summers!" growled Wolverine—and as he spoke, he realized that Scott Summers had *always* been in his way.

The X-Men could have made a real difference but for their timid leader, always preaching restraint, always ensuring that their work was left half-done. They had defeated villain after villain—but the villains always came back. Their continual presence made the world a darker and darker place, and *it was all his fault*.

Wolverine had been fighting all his life. But now, with a sudden blinding clarity, he saw that he had been fighting the wrong people.

Cyclops had reined in his emotions. Tight-lipped, his voice trembling, he said coldly: "If we're to defeat Blackheart and Selene, you have to die first. I see that now."

"And if we're to do the job properly, it'll have to be without you holding us back."

Wolverine took the brunt of the next optic blast in his chest, but he had braced himself for it. His teeth gritted, he fought his way forward through the beam of ruby force until he was almost within a claw's reach of his opponent's throat. At that point, Cyclops switched tactics and leapt forward to punch him on the chin.

A red mist descended in front of Wolverine's eyes, and he howled with pure animalistic rage as he launched himself at his one-time friend.

"She's seen us," said Nightcrawler.

He lowered the binoculars through which he had just seen Selene look directly at him before smiling, turning and walking back into her building. He turned to Shaw, who was standing on the rooftop behind him, still dressed in the garb of the White Knight but unmasked. But for the wind ruffling his hair, he remained perfectly still. His hands were clasped behind his back, but his rigid body and solemn expression belied his casual pose. He didn't seem unduly concerned at the news, but Kurt thought he detected a slight twitch in a muscle beneath one of his eyes. "Do we still have a telepathic lock on her?" Shaw asked quietly.

Beside him, Phoenix nodded. Her eyes were closed, her brow furrowed in concentration, and she answered in a strained voice. "She's moving down the hallway. She's in no hurry."

"Then we proceed as planned."

Nightcrawler nodded and took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come. He reached out to the final two members of the five-strong assemblage: the young mutants whom he knew only by the code names of Lightshow and Booster. They took hold of his three-fingered hands, and Lightshow in turn tugged gingerly at the hem of Shaw's jacket.

"She's at the top of the stairs," murmured Phoenix as Shaw linked her arm with his. "She's going down them."

"Excellent," breathed Shaw. "Excellent!"

“Shouldn’t we go in now?” asked Nightcrawler. “Since we’ve had the good fortune to catch Selene above ground ...”

Shaw shook his head. “On the ground floor, she has too many places to run, and too many demon agents to defend her.”

“But Blackheart...”

“... will be kept occupied long enough for us to do our job,” said Shaw confidently.

Nightcrawler accepted his decision. Shaw had explained in his briefing that he considered Selene’s throne room the best place to confront her. She would be cornered there, and Lightshow could block the door with a solid hologram to prevent her minions from reaching her. Kurt concentrated on visualizing the corridor outside the room, on the first basement level of the Hellfire Club’s mansion house. He was certain that he could remember it well enough to teleport into it without the risk of materializing inside a wall. He was less certain, however, that he could take four people with him. Normally, even a tandem ‘port placed great stress upon the bodies of both him and his passenger. He prayed that Booster’s power to augment the mutant abilities of others was all it was reputed to be.

The boy couldn’t have been more than thirteen or fourteen years old, and his thin, acne-scarred face was ashen with apprehension. Nightcrawler hated the thought of taking him into combat, but there was no other option. He tightened his grip on Booster’s hand; he had expected to feel an energy surge, but there was nothing.

Suddenly, Phoenix cried out and clutched her hands to her head. Her legs buckled, and only Shaw’s firm hold on her arm prevented her from falling to her knees. With difficulty, Nightcrawler resisted the impulse to break the chain and rush to her side. “What is it?” asked Shaw brusquely, with no hint of sympathy.

"Selene... detected my presence in her... mind," Phoenix panted. "She ... expelled me."

"You've lost her?"

Phoenix nodded weakly. Shaw turned to Nightcrawler. "Take us in," he ordered, "now!"

Nightcrawler screwed his eyes shut, gritted his teeth, held his breath and teleported.

To his relief, it didn't hurt at all. The five mutants arrived at their destination with an ear-deadening burst of imploding air and a larger than normal billow of smoke. They were midway between the door of

Selene's throne room and the staircase upon which she had last been detected, only a few seconds ago; however, as the smoke began to thin, Nightcrawler saw to his dismay that there was no sign of the Black Queen.

"She can't have gone far," insisted Shaw, a hint of worry entering his tone at last.

"I can't locate her," reported Phoenix-and Nightcrawler could see from her expression that the veiy effort of using her psychic abilities was hurting her.

"Keep scanning," rapped Shaw, "and keep us linked." Phoenix nodded bravely. "Lightshow and Booster, check the stairs; Nightcrawler, the throne room."

"Jawohl, mein Herr," acknowledged Nightcrawler with only a touch of resentment. As Shaw hurried past him to search the rest of the floor, he teleported again, solo this time. *Remember*, Shaw's voice said inside his head, relayed there by Phoenix, *if we can't find Selene, a sample of the Legacy cure is the next best thing.*

He began to search the deserted throne room.

Selene crept along the carpeted corridor to where Phoenix stood, thinking herself alone. In her mind's eye, she could see the tendrils of psionic force emanating from the X-Man, slipping easily in and out of the ceiling, walls and floor as they searched for their quany. The Black Queen could not have shielded her thoughts by force of mind alone—she had

to admit to herself that Phoenix was the more powerful telepath—but she had other means at her disposal. A simple cantrip had rendered her undetectable to all senses, psychic or otherwise.

She waited until she was at her foe's shoulder before she dropped her cover.

Phoenix detected her presence almost immediately and whirled around, alarmed.

Selene smiled, and hit her with a devastating mindbolt for which she was totally unprepared. She didn't even have time to scream, let alone issue a warning to her friends. Her brain shut itself off, her eyes rolled back into her head and she crumpled. The Black Queen left her lying on the floor, catatonic, staring into nowhere.

She almost bumped into two of Shaw's younger idealists as she reached the stairs. The pair cowered from her, terrified; Selene could sense their thoughts as they tried to contact their leader, and their despair as they realized that their link to him had been broken. She brushed past them, considering them unworthy of her attention-but as she headed downstairs, to her surprise, her way was barred by a brick wall. She attempted to remove the obstruction, but frowned as she realized that she couldn't manipulate its molecules as she could those of most objects.

She turned to look at the young mutant called Lightshow, an eyebrow raised. "It appears I have underestimated you, my friend," she purred.

At that, both boys turned and ran. But it took no more than a thought on Selene's part for the carpet itself to trip them. As they fell in a tangle of arms and legs, she bludgeoned her way through Lightshow's pitiful psychic defenses, took control of his mind and compelled him to lower his barrier.

Less than a minute later, she unbolted and opened the heavy wooden door that led into the catacombs. She stood at the head of the collapsed staircase and looked down

upon a scene of chaos, savoring the heady concoction of anger, fear and confusion that her consort had unleashed. Blackheart was playing with the emotions of his erstwhile attackers, overwhelming them with feelings of hatred and jealousy and turning them against each other. Even some of the X-Men had succumbed to his influence. Rogue was on her knees weeping, and Selene sensed that she was consumed by self-loathing for the sins of her past. Cyclops and Wolverine were locked in hand-to-hand combat, neither giving any quarter, and it was surely inevitable that one would kill the other. She looked forward to it. She might even leave the victor alive, to nurse his paralyzing guilt in her nightmare chambers.

Storm, on the other hand, was still very much active. She had created her own weather system in the cavern, and thick black clouds obscured its roof altogether. Blackheart was actually beginning to reel beneath a sustained onslaught of wind, rain and lightning. Selene had never seen the wind-rider unleash her elemental fury with such abandon before, and the sight was breathtaking. Focused as Storm was on staying out of her target's reach, however, she was vulnerable to an attack from behind.

Selene encased her in stone, enjoying the X-Man's terror as a brittle shell hardened around her. As Storm fell from the sky, the Black Queen gathered up the debris of the staircase and returned it to its old formation.

With the X-Men no longer a threat, Blackheart turned his attention to the rest of Shaw's ineffectual band of rebels. He downed at least a dozen of them with one sweep of his arm, then he gathered up six more in his hands and crushed the life out of them. They mustered what resistance they could, striking back with feeble punches and sparks of bio-energy, but they never stood a chance.

Selene swept regally down the restored stone staircase, her lips twisting into a smirk at the knowledge that her victory was assured.

Jean Grey's consciousness was a guttering flame in a black void. She was fighting to keep it lit, to hold back the shadows that threatened to engulf it and snuff it out forever. But then, unexpectedly, the flame was fanned. It grew into a roaring fire and exploded triumphantly into a birdlike shape, which dispelled the darkness.

And Phoenix awoke with a gasp to find the young mutant Booster kneeling beside her.

She flashed him a grateful smile, realizing that he must have amplified her powers and enabled her to fight back against the effects of Selene's attack. Her head was no longer aching, but she was suddenly, shockingly aware of everything and everybody around her in minute detail. She felt as if she were seeing the world in a new light, and understanding it at last. Without having to search for them, she knew where each of the X-Men were, and what they were going through. She was on a different plane, hovering above them, watching them from a great distance as they went through their flat, three-dimensional lives. She was tingling with power, but the sensation reminded her of something else—a faded dream from, it seemed, a long, long time ago—and the tingle became an icy shudder.

She narrowed the focus of her senses, sifting out relevant information from a tidal wave of thoughts. She entered the minds of Cyclops, Wolverine and Rogue and reasoned with them gently, helping them to regain control over their artificially heightened emotions. She calmed Storm's fear at being entombed again and allowed her to see herself from the outside, so that she could call down lightning with pinpoint precision and shatter her stone prison.

And then she felt something else: a series of psionic shock waves rippling through the ether. Phoenix didn't know what was causing them at first—but then, through Wolverine's eyes, she saw Selene stiffen and wince. On a hunch, she allowed her mind to drift away from Manhattan Island—and there, beyond the Black Queen's barrier, she

touched the thoughts of a vast assemblage of heroes, some familiar to her, some less so. The Avengers, the Defenders, the Fantastic Four, the Thunderbolts ... the list seemed endless.

It could have been a coincidence, of course, that they had chosen this moment to launch an all-out attack upon the barrier-but

Phoenix thought she detected the hand of her missing teammate, Iceman, in this fortuitous turn of events.

Selene's distracted, she told the rest of the X-Men and the remaining rebels simultaneously. *We'll never have a better chance than this to take her down!*

"I won't have the blood you shed on my conscience any more!" Cyclops blasted his opponent square in the chest and sent him flying backwards. Before Wolverine could regain his balance, Scott closed the gap between them and leapt on top of him. The pair rolled over and over on the ground. A set of claws whistled past Cyclops's ear-a little too close for comfort, but he was sure that his teammate knew what he was doing.

Selene's buying it, Wolverine reported via the newly reestablished telepathic link. *She isn't even glancing our way; thinks we're too busy knocking hell out of each other to worry about her. I'm gonna throw you forwards and right in three... two ... one...*

Wolverine's foot struck Cyclops in the stomach-but, prepared for the blow, he rolled with it, closer, ever closer, to his real target. Impatient as he was to make his move, to bring this to an end before anybody else had to die, he knew that the timing of his attack was crucial. Thankfully, Rogue and Storm were airborne again, drawing Blackheart's attention and ending his massacre of Shaw's less able followers for now.

Shaw himself had just been teleported into the cavern by Nightcrawler. He walked calmly towards Selene, his hands held up in front of him in a conciliatory gesture. "I trust we

aren't too early?" he said with a wry smile. "You appear to be coping well enough, in any case."

Selene looked confused and uncertain of herself. "Stay back, Shaw," she warned. "I don't know if I can trust you."

But Shaw kept coming. "My dear lady, you know you can always count on my loyalty—just as I could always count on yours."

His eyes hardened and he leapt for her throat, but she saw the attack coming. She waved her arms, and the ground reared up in front of her to form a shield. With a telepathic yell of *Now!* Cyclops spun around and aimed an optic blast at her back. To his astonishment, it passed straight through her, leaving her unharmed. She turned, just in time to meet a charge from Wolverine. For all her powers, she wasn't a match for him in close combat—and yet somehow, he ended up on his back on the ground beside her.

"She's cast some sort of illusion spell," he cried. "She's about six inches to the right of where you think she is."

Cyclops adjusted his aim accordingly—but before he could fire again, Selene's eyes flashed and she took control of the molecules in his mask. She tightened it around his head so that his visor folded in upon itself, its ruby lens cracking beneath the strain, and his eyes were sealed shut. Blinded and helpless, he tore desperately at the constricting cloth.

He could still sense the others through the telepathic link. He knew that Nightcrawler had joined the assault on Blackheart, but he feared that even three X-Men couldn't hold out against the demon for much longer. He was proved right when, to his horror, Kurt teleported too close to his adversary and was seized by a stony hand. Blackheart dashed the X-Man against the wall and let him drop. Cyclops shared the pain of his shattering impact, and his heart sank into his stomach as he felt the light flee from his teammate's mind.

Rogue was the next to fall, so distraught was she at the fate of her friend that she misjudged a turn and flew into a crushing blow. Only Storm now stood between Blackheart and his beleaguered Black Queen. Wolverine, in the meantime, had reached Selene, but she was manipulating the very adamantium in his claws to bend them back upon themselves. He howled like a wounded animal, and Cyclops felt sick as he realized why. Selene had no power over organic matter; the bones inside the metal could not bend with it, they could only break.

The door to the Hellfire Club building flew open again, and a horde of demons in blue and red costumes began to pour down the stone steps into the cavern.

You must keep at her, insisted Phoenix from afar. *She's trying to maintain her barrier and fight off my telepathic attacks. She's stretched too far. She's weakening!*

Jean had included Shaw in the link, and Scott could feel his hatred, his tightly focused rage and the unshakable determination that drove him as he finally laid hands upon the woman who had usurped his throne. "You'll never betray me again," he spat. "You'll never humiliate me. I won't let you shape my destiny!"

Beneath a barrage of kinetically charged punches that would have shattered concrete, the Black Queen fell at last.

Cyclops hurled aside the tattered remnants of his mask and donned a pair of ruby quartz spectacles from a pouch on his belt. They wouldn't give him as much control over his eye-beams as his visor did, but at least he could see again through their red-tinted lenses.

The demon agents were halfway down the steps now. He raised his glasses and stunned the first two; as they fell, they also brought down the creatures behind them. He had delayed the arrival of reinforcements by vital seconds.

Lowering his sights, he saw Shaw's hands closing around Selene's throat. He saw the madness in the former Black King's expression and sensed his intention to kill his

tormentor. Narrowing his eyes, he stung Shaw's fingers with a low-powered burst of energy.

"It's over, Shaw," he said. "Leave it."

Selene made no move to rise. Her pale face was bruised and she was sporting a cut lip and a black eye. Shaw glared at Cyclops, but he didn't renew his attack; whether this was because he recognized the truth of the X-Man's words or simply because his mutant power wouldn't protect him from a full-strength optic blast, Scott couldn't tell.

Blackheart had seen that Selene was down, and he gave an almighty roar. He strode across the cavern, his footfalls shaking the earth and bringing down trickles of dust and pebbles from the roof. Storm tried to blind him by gathering clouds around his head and placing him at the center of a torrential rainstorm, but he pressed on regardless. She assailed him with bolts of lightning, so powerful that they took chips out of his hide; they evidently caused him pain, but Blackheart shrugged them off like insect bites. The surviving rebels could do no more than scramble to get out of his way before they were stepped on.

Cyclops stood over the Black Queen, his back to the approaching leviathan, and fingered the frame of his glasses. "You've lost, Selene," he said sternly. "Call off your demons-all of them-or I'll finish the job that Shaw started."

"Give me the word, my Queen," said Blackheart, suddenly looming over his shoulder, "and I will crush this brazen mortal to dust." Cyclops swallowed his fear and concentrated on maintaining his grim expression. He didn't know if he could carry out his threat or not, but he had to make Selene believe it. He had to make her believe that even the son of Mephisto couldn't act fast enough to prevent him from killing her.

To his relief, Storm, Wolverine and Shaw joined him; between them, the quartet formed a threatening circle around their enemy as she climbed to her feet. Selene pivoted slowly on the spot, looking at each of their faces

and perhaps reading the thoughts behind them too. By the time she stood eye to eye with Cyclops, she was obviously convinced. She raised her right hand and clicked her fingers twice, and the creatures behind her turned and shuffled away up the staircase in single file. Blackheart shrank down to human size, although Cyclops remained acutely aware of the demon's malevolent presence beside him.

Selene smiled. "Congratulations, Mr. Summers," she said. "You have won the game. Manhattan Island is yours."

"This wasn't a game to us, Selene."

"Nevertheless, my barrier has fallen-and the human champions of this world are even now fighting their way towards us."

"There's one more thing," said Cyclops. "We want the cure to the Legacy Virus."

Selene shrugged as if it no longer mattered to her. "The spoils of a war well fought," she said. "Very well. Your wife has plucked its location from my mind anyway. I should have had the foresight to kill both her and the power amplifier when I had them at my mercy."

"You've been responsible for quite enough deaths already," said Cyclops tersely.

"I have, haven't I?" said Selene brightly, beaming with pride. "A shame it had to end like this. Still, there will be other games."

"Not for you there won't," growled Wolverine.

Phoenix sent a telepathic warning of what was about to happen, but Cyclops received it too late. He had been watching his defeated foe so closely that he hadn't anticipated his teammate's sudden action. He didn't have time to do anything but curse himself for his momentary lapse as Wolverine pounced and drove a set of claws into Selene's back.

The Black Queen stiffened as three adamantium tips emerged from her chest in a spray of blood. For a tense, interminable second, nobody moved or made a sound.

Selene's eyes were wide, her red lips tight and her face even whiter than usual. She looked down at the claws as if the impaling of her heart upon three spikes were no more than an inconvenient surprise for her. But then, her centuries-old body crumbled, losing definition in an instant as it collapsed into a pile of fine ash. A moment later, gravity caught up with her black Hellfire Club costume and it fell too, beating her remains up into a choking gray cloud.

Wolverine was left standing with an arm outstretched, his claws extended and a gleam of malicious satisfaction in his eye. He returned Cyclops's look of disbelieving horror with a lopsided grin and a cheerful wink.

And Blackheart let out a howl that sounded like the clashing of continents.

In the moment before the demon dispensed bloody retribution, Cyclops heard Wolverine's telepathic voice in his head: *Just wanted to test a theory. If our distracting Selene helped to bring her barrier down, I wondered what other spells might just wear off if we could take her out of the picture altogether.*

Blackheart was growing again, and drawing back a huge fist, but time had slipped a groove and everything was moving in slow-motion. Cyclops turned his head, the simple movement seeming to take an age, and he saw that everything and everybody around him was picked out in negative. And then the images blurred and changed, and he was somewhere else.

Somewhere he had been before ...



CHAPTER 14

NIGHTCRAWLER WAS trying to run forward, but something held him back. Everything around him was black; he couldn't see

_where he was going and he didn't know why, but he knew he

had to get there. His teammates were around him, but they too were moving as if through treacle. They were picked out in negative like images caught on a strip of film. He had experienced something like this before, but he couldn't remember when.

Blackheart had killed him. That much, he did remember. Was this, then, an afterlife? If so, then everything he had believed in was wrong. His chest swelled with dread and the only thought he could hold on to was that none of this could be true, that he had to get through it, had to keep on running until he had torn himself free of this damnable black light...

And then the colors of the world inverted around him, and he caught his breath and almost tumbled forward as he burst back into reality and found himself in Selene's throne room. He saw the Beast, unconscious, strung up by his wrists in an alcove, his blood trickling into a glass container, and he saw the Black Queen standing by her throne. A smile of triumph had frozen on her pale face, and a horrified look had begun to dawn in her eyes.

It took Nightcrawler a second to work out where and when he was, and to adjust to the fact that he was no longer even bruised from his encounter with Blackheart. Even the tears in his costume had vanished, and his teammates also seemed to be in better shape than when he had last seen them. Sebastian Shaw, he noted, was back in his green combat suit rather than his white Hellfire Club attire. He didn't know what had happened since his ... since he ...

while he had been asleep, but somehow, thank God, the X-Men had been given a second chance.

They had been returned to the place and time from which Selene had expelled them, as if they had never left. And evidently, she was surprised to see them. Which was just as

well, because Nightcrawler's teammates were every bit as confused and disoriented as he was.

Wolverine was the first to act, but Selene was only an instant behind him. She brought up her hands, and the air in front of her shimmered. The Canadian X-Man bounced off a transparent but no less solid mystical force field, but by now Rogue and Cyclops were running at their black-clad foe from each side. Selene gestured again, and the flames of a dozen black candles streaked towards her and formed themselves into the shapes of leering demons. Storm took to the air and doused the infernal creatures with a localized but fierce rainstorm; the flames hissed and guttered but were not completely extinguished.

Even as Nightcrawler leapt forward, Selene pointed over his head; he turned to see that she had animated the door through which he had entered the room. It cracked and squealed as it strained to loose itself from its hinges, reaching out and coiling strands of wood around Iceman, Phoenix and Shaw. It took all of Nightcrawler's agility to keep himself from becoming similarly trapped. Even entwined, however, the X-Men weren't helpless. Phoenix's eyes turned red as she engaged Selene in a psychic struggle, and Iceman unleashed a barrage of snow upon the fire demons.

Seeing that the tide was turning against her, Selene shrieked three words that sent a chill down Nightcrawler's spine: "Blackheart-to me!"

Shaw had already broken his bonds, and Rogue was running to help Iceman and Phoenix. Nightcrawler teleported to the ceiling and looked down on the field of battle, awaiting an opportunity. The room began to shake with the sound of approaching heavy footsteps, and he knew that he only had seconds before Blackheart arrived and all was lost.

With the fire demons quenched, Cyclops, Wolverine and Storm rushed Selene from three directions at once. She

clenched her fists, set her jaw and repulsed her attackers with a wave of pure psycho-kinetic force. While the Black Queen was thus occupied, Nightcrawler dropped onto her shoulders, wrapped his legs around her neck and teleported with her.

He appeared in the Hellfire Club's ballroom, reeling from the strain of the tandem 'port. He was glad of the fact that he had emptied the room of bystanders, an age ago now it seemed.

Where are you, Kurt? came the voice of Phoenix in his head.

One floor straight up, he responded. He had remembered that Blackheart was confined to the lower levels of the building and he knew that, so long as the X-Men could keep Selene up here, she would be denied the support of her deadly ally.

Even alone, however, the Black Queen was too powerful for him. She let out a howl of rage as she reached up and seized Nightcrawler's legs. At the same time, he felt her cold, baleful presence in his mind, battering down the rudimentary psychic defenses that Professor Xavier and Phoenix had helped him to build. He lost his grip on Selene's neck, and she threw him to the floor. Winded, he was unable to teleport away as she raised her hands, her fingers crooked, and he felt a searing agony inside him as if she had set light to his soul.

"You dare to challenge me, little goblin?" she shrilled. "I have ruled empires. I have seen civilizations rise and fall. I have preyed on the weak since time immemorial."

"Really? I must... say, you don't look a ... day over..." Nightcrawler grimaced, unable to complete the taunt. He had never felt pain quite like this before, but he refused to surrender to it. He bit down to keep himself from screaming, his fangs cutting into his lower lip. He clung on to his last slender thread of consciousness and forced his trembling hands to reach out, to take Selene by the throat. He couldn't

let her go, couldn't let her return to the basement and Blackheart, couldn't let her win this time. He had seen the unholy future that she would build upon such a victory, and he refused to let it happen again.

Blinded by pain, he almost didn't notice that the floor was shaking beneath him until at last it erupted in a scarlet haze. The pain ceased abruptly as he and Selene were flung away from each other, and he rolled aside as a black-clad figure hurtled past him.

There was a jagged hole in the floor, created as Nightcrawler now realized by Cyclops. Storm had already flown up from the throne room below, and Wolverine, Iceman and the team's leader himself were close behind her, carried aloft no doubt by Phoenix.

As the X-Men closed upon their foe, Kurt Wagner allowed himself to pass out at last.

The throne room was still shaking, and Rogue feared that Blackheart might burst through the wall at any moment. She tried not to think about it, tried not to think about what he had done to both her and Kurt in that terrible future. A friend was in danger, and she had to save him.

"Hank! Hank!" she shouted, slapping the Beast's cheeks gently with her gloved hands. "Come on Hank, it's me, Rogue. Can you hear me? You've got to wake up!"

It was no good. He was well and truly unconscious, still breath-ing-albeit shallowly—but hanging like a dead weight from the wall. Rogue remembered Selene's boast that she had killed him shortly after the X-Men's departure. She knew now how it must have happened. She couldn't remember offhand how much blood there was in the average human body, but the glass container at the Beast's feet had to have taken most of his fill. It was impossible to tell if his skin was pale beneath his blue fur, but he was certainly looking gaunt.

Rogue took hold of him around the waist and tried to tear him free from the tendrils that held him and were draining

him. She wasn't sure if this was such a good idea, but she suspected that there wasn't time to approach the operation more delicately. The tendrils were stubborn, though, and she resorted to feeling for them over the Beast's shoulder and plucking them out of his back one by one. To her frustration, they squirmed and writhed like snakes and implanted themselves in him again. The blood in the glass container was still rising.

She was relieved when Phoenix came to her aid: as Rogue wrenched each tendril loose, Jean flattened it against the wall telekinetically to prevent it from striking again. Finally, the Beast collapsed against Rogue, who hauled him across the room and out of danger.

"I'm keeping his wounds sealed," said Phoenix, her face grim with concentration, "but he's lost a lot of blood already. We've got to get him to a hospital." The room was vibrating so fiercely now that Rogue could hardly hear her, but she caught the gist of her words.

She bundled her unconscious teammate into Phoenix's arms. "You go ahead!" she shouted over the shriek of protesting stonework. "I've just thought of something I have to do." Phoenix opened her mouth as if to argue, but there was no time. The door had returned to its original shape after Selene's departure, but now it collapsed inward with a heavy thud as Blackheart strode into the room.

He was shorter than when Rogue had last seen him, but no less imposing for his diminished stature. In any case, his petrified hair still scraped the top of the doorway-and as he entered the throne room, he grew to fill its full height. "Jean, get Hank out of here!"

Rogue yelled, and she rocketed toward the stony-skinned demon. He struck out with blinding speed and knocked her out of the air with a casual sweep of his hand. As she crashed into the debris of the fallen ceiling, the demon leapt at Phoenix, who was levitating herself and the Beast toward the upper floor. Rogue's distraction had given her a second,

but no more; fortunately, it was enough. Blackheart made a swipe at the escaping X-Men, but howled as his fingers slammed into an invisible barrier where the ceiling had once been.

For a moment, Rogue dared to hope that the demon had forgotten about her. She crawled quickly over to the container that held the Beast's stolen blood. She picked it up and held it to her chest even as Blackheart rounded on her, his eyes blazing furiously.

She didn't pretend to understand half of what the Beast had told her about his work on a Legacy cure-but she knew that, if the Black Queen wanted his blood, then it could only be for one reason. And having seen the future, she knew that this was no false hope: the cure would really work this time. That was what she had come back for. Now, Rogue was holding the means by which mutantkind-perhaps the whole world-could be saved.

If only she could get it out of this place alive.

For one devastating instant, Phoenix had felt Blackheart's rough fingers against her leg, and her heart had plummeted. She had repelled the demon's hand telekinetically and tried to speed her upward progress, knowing that her mind was no match for his great physical strength. But then, miraculously, she was in the Hellfire Club's ballroom and he was howling at her from below. She thanked her lucky stars for Daimon Hellstrom and his containment spell, and prayed that Rogue would find similar fortune. She desperately wanted to turn back for her teammate, but there was nothing she could do for her now.

She could only hope that the same was not true of the Beast. His body felt cold in her arms, and her mental probes detected only the slightest spark of activity in his brain.

The X-Men had managed to drive Selene away from the hole in the floor, away from the restricted reach of her demonic ally. However, the battle was by no means over. From Jean's vantage point, it looked as if the whole room

had turned against them. The Black Queen was fighting back fiercely, and every molecule of her surroundings had been reshaped and bent to her iron will. A table had reared up to keep Wolverine's claws away from their target; a bronze bust had come to life and fastened its teeth onto Cyclops's arm;

Storm was finding it difficult to remain aloft as her own cloak wrapped itself around her and tried to suffocate her; and Iceman was kept off-balance as the very floorboards at his feet tore through their carpet covering and snatched at his ankles.

Phoenix started as she realized that Nightcrawler was lying unconscious in a corner; his body had blended in with the shadows, and she hadn't seen him at first. However, he didn't appear too badly hurt.

Her path to the door was blocked, and she had no desire to drag the unconscious Beast into the melee. However, the ballroom's leaded windows looked directly out onto the street. Jean reached out with her mind and tore the animated bust away from her husband; it had probably been modeled after a famous composer or a politician, but now its metal face was twisted with hatred and unrecognizable. It glared at her in apparent anger as she smashed it through the nearest window and created a new exit for herself.

It was dark outside, and relatively quiet. Phoenix was confused for a moment, but then she remembered how little time had really passed since the X-Men had stood in Central Park, shortly after midnight, and planned their attack. In fact, there were more people around than she would have expected. She saw clusters of men in evening dress and women in elaborate gowns, and she realized that the Hellfire Club members whom Nightcrawler had scared out of the ballroom had not gone too far. Perhaps they had even been plucking up the courage to return to the building when she had made her appearance.

The sight of a costumed mutant hovering above the Fifth Avenue sidewalk with her blue-furred companion cradled in her arms was the last straw for many of them. As some people stared agog, others simply turned and ran. A drunken man hollered something about “muties,” and his lady companion hushed him fearfully and dragged him away.

A distracted driver steered his vehicle into the back of another; a third driver steered around the blockage and onto the opposite sidewalk in his haste to get away; and, upon seeing what lay ahead of her, a fourth stepped on her brakes and threw her car into reverse.

Phoenix was used to such reactions—she even understood the fear from which they were born—but they still hurt. She tried to ignore them as she hurried southward, her mind bearing most of the Beast’s weight, alarmed and slightly drunk pedestrians scattering before her. She set eyes upon an empty yellow cab, but the cabby saw her too and put his foot down, studiously ignoring her. Phoenix took control of his mind and forced him to stop. She hated using her powers like that—to enforce her will upon another human being, she believed, made her no better than many of the X-Men’s foes—but a life was at stake.

She floated the Beast into the back seat of the cab and leapt in after him. “This man needs a hospital,” she said, “and fast!” With a modicum of hope, she returned control of the cabby’s mind to him. He shot his seatbelt and made to open the door and flee.

“If that’s the way it has to be ...” she sighed as, reluctantly, she retook the strings of her puppet.

A second later, the sound of squealing tires pierced the night air as the cab raced off on its mercy dash.

Rogue was staring at Blackheart. She couldn’t help it. She was screaming inside, telling herself that she had to move, had to *get out of here*, but his red eyes filled her world and she couldn’t control her muscles, couldn’t turn

her head, couldn't move her arms or legs, couldn't tear her gaze away from him. She was mesmerized, rooted to the spot by a primal terror that fried her nerve endings and set off a clamor of alarm bells inside her brain.

He was playing with her emotions again, she realized-and that knowledge, she hoped, would make her able to resist him. She tried to override her feelings with logic, to retake control of herself. If anybody could do it, she told herself sternly, she could. Every time she used her mutant ability, every time she stole the thoughts of another person, she had to fight to assert her own personality. Surely this was little different?

The demon extended one hand towards her. He was taking his time, enjoying her fear, and that proved to be his mistake. Willing herself with every fiber of her being to move, Rogue took to the air even as Blackheart unleashed a torrent of molten lava from his fingertips. She couldn't help but look back over her shoulder, her heartbeat quickening as the white-hot fluid hardened into a misshapen lump on the ground.

She aimed to fly over Blackheart's shoulder and through the hole in the ceiling, but he was too fast for her. He reared up in front of her again, and she was forced to make a rapid course correction. Stone fingers snapped at Rogue's heel as she hurtled out of the throne room through the doorway, the heavy glass container of blood still clutched to her chest.

She rocketed down the basement corridor, her speed turning the wooden panels and paintings on each side of her into pastel-colored blurs. She didn't dare look back, but she could neither hear nor sense Blackheart behind her. She had expected to gain a second or two as he reduced himself in size to follow her, but this total disappearance was unnerving.

She slowed down to round a tight corner, and suddenly he was in front of her again, at the foot of the staircase that would have taken her beyond his reach, hunched up to fit

his gargantuan body into the corridor. Briefly, she considered trying to plow through him, but she had tried something similar before with disastrous results. Instead, she pulled up short just as she was about to hit him. She executed a sharp right turn and darted off down an adjoining passageway. But this time, she was too slow.

Blackheart caught hold of her, his hand encircling both her ankles. He yanked her backwards and slammed her into the wall. It was all she could do to keep hold of her fragile cargo. She tried to pull herself free from his grip, but the demon's fingers were exerting such pressure that they threatened to crush the bones in her feet to paste. She considered using her power against him as she had against Pierce—but she knew instinctively that she wouldn't be able to cope with any part of this evil creature inside her. He would overwhelm her.

And then Blackheart swung Rogue like a baseball bat, and she saw the opposite wall of the corridor coming towards her but she couldn't stop herself from hitting it face first.

And the container shattered in her arms.

She let out a scream of frustration as she tumbled to the floor in a shower of glass and blood. For all she knew, the Beast was probably dead and his life's work, his hopes and dreams, were soaking into her costume. Blackheart loomed over her, and she wanted to lash out at him, to make him pay for what he had done, but she knew it would do no good. Instead, she picked herself up, her furious eyes fixed upon him as if she were about to attack...

... and then she dived between his legs, took flight to avoid a swipe from his tail and flew as fast as she could up the stairway. She emerged onto the ground floor sweating and shaking, her costume plastered to her chest and her legs unsure if they could support her weight. But she thanked her lucky stars that she had made it at all, that her

desperate maneuver had apparently taken her demonic foe by surprise.

Or perhaps, she thought, with the cure destroyed, he had simply had no reason to detain her any longer.

The sounds of battle still echoed around the throne room, although the combatants themselves were no longer visible through the hole in its ceiling. As Sebastian Shaw emerged from his hiding place behind the Black Queen's throne, he let out a quiet sigh of relief. He had risked much by staying behind and taking cover when the X-Men had left; had Blackheart not been distracted by Phoenix and Rogue, then he could have lost his life. However, much of Shaw's prosperity had been built upon his willingness to take such risks in the name of progress.

Alone now, he pulled a purple drape from the back of the throne and laid it across the seat. The floor was strewn with slush left by Iceman's attack upon one of the fire demons; Shaw filled his cupped hands with the half-melted ice and dropped it onto the velvet. Then he removed one of his padded gloves and popped open a compartment in his belt, from which he produced a small, thin vial. He held it gingerly between two fingers as he strode over to the alcove in which the Beast had been held.

It was unfortunate that Rogue had escaped with the Beast's blood, but the ultimate prize was not yet out of Shaw's reach. Slimy green-brown tentacles grew out of the wooden wall; most of them hung limply as if dead, but a few still thrashed about defiantly. He seized one of them in his gloved hand, being careful to avoid its barbed end, and gave it a sudden, savage tug. It tore, leaving him with a length of about eight inches. As he had hoped, a trickle of blood seeped from the tendril's severed end. He held it over the vial and closed his gloved fist around it until he had squeezed it dry. Then he stoppered the full container with a rubber cork and, discarding the dead tendril as he returned to the throne, he pressed it into the ice. Donning his glove

again, he ladled another scoop of slush on top of it before wrapping the whole bundle inside the velvet drape and gathering it into his arms. His makeshift icepack would serve, he hoped, to keep the blood fresh until he could get it to a refrigerator.

Fortunately, before he had met the X-Men in Central Park, he had had the foresight to plan a quick retreat. He activated a signaling device on his belt, knowing that his personal assistant Tessa would be standing by to receive the signal and to home in on its point of origin. Indeed, from her point of view, she would have waited only an hour or two for his call.

The thought of Tessa gave Shaw pause. She hadn't betrayed him yet—not in this time period—and perhaps she never would. But he had been wrong about her. He had seen a side of her that he had never imagined could exist, and it had left him disconcerted. He couldn't think of her, couldn't trust her, in the way that he once had. He had nobody now. Perhaps he was destined to remain alone, But there would be time for such troubling thoughts later. For now, it was enough to know that Tessa would serve him as she had always served him before. Shaw slipped out of the door, pausing in the corridor outside to listen for sounds of movement. He heard nothing, but he knew that Rogue had turned to the left with Blackheart on her heels, so he headed to the right, picking his way through the unconscious and dead bodies of the Black Queen's vanquished demons. While Selene was occupied above ground, he would make a surreptitious exit through the catacombs and the sewers beyond them.

When next he entered this building, he swore, it would be as its owner again.

In the ballroom, the battle was almost over. Wolverine knew when an opponent was defeated, and Selene had been on the defensive for minutes, still fighting with all her might but losing ground. She ripped up more floorboards,

forming them into a barrier as nails flew at the X-Men like shrapnel. They stung Wolverine's cheeks and made him blink, but no more than that. "Watch out," he cautioned the others, "she's trying to get below ground again."

Cyclops had already realized that: he aimed a series of staccato blasts at Selene's feet, forcing her to skip back from the hole she had made. Storm lifted her into the air, where she kicked and squealed in impotent fury as Iceman plugged her would-be escape route.

Wolverine fought his way through the hovering floorboards as Storm dropped the Black Queen into his path. She screamed out loud as he lunged for her, his claws coming a hair's breadth from gutting her. He had planned it that way, of course—there was no need to kill her this time—but he took a certain pleasure in imagining Cyclops's reaction to the near miss.

In dodging his attack, Selene had left herself open as he had planned. Cyclops concluded the battle with a stunning optic blast, which knocked the sorceress off her feet. Wolverine was on top of her in an instant, his claws at her throat. "It's all over, sweetheart!" he growled. "Make one move, or say anything that sounds like a spell, and I'll cut out your voice box!"

"Easy, Logan," said Cyclops, "she's beaten."

Wolverine glowered at him; he was about to make a remark about being patronized when Iceman spoke in a quivering voice: "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

The menacing figure of Blackheart had appeared in the doorway. Iceman tried to keep him there by forming a block of ice around his feet, but the demon simply strode through it like a ghost. "I thought we decided he couldn't come upstairs," protested Bobby, backing away.

"We did," said Cyclops tersely. "Wolverine?"

"Can't smell a thing," said Wolverine with a grin, "and believe me, that sucker gives off some stink. We're looking at a projection." "Indeed," said Blackheart calmly, coming to

a halt before the wary mutants. "With my physical body bound to the underground levels of this building, I can send only my astral form into this room. That form is sufficient, however, to inform you that there is no longer a reason for us to fight."

"What do you mean, Blackheart?" snapped Selene from her prone position.

"The Beast, my Queen, has been rescued—and the Legacy cure has been lost."

"If this is a trick—" began Cyclops.

"It's no trick, Cyke," came a despondent voice from the doorway. Blackheart stood aside to reveal Rogue. She hobbled into the room as if her feet were causing her pain. The front of her green costume was stained by a large dark patch, which Wolverine identified by its smell as dried blood, and she wore a miserable expression. "I'm sorry, y'all. I tried my best to save it."

"Then it seems," said Selene with a tight smile, "that Blackheart is correct. The prize has gone; the game is over. None of us have anything to gain by prolonging this confrontation." Her old arrogance was returning, and she pushed Wolverine's claws aside and got to her feet. He glared at her, a growl in the back of his throat, but he did not move to stop her. Perhaps she would give him a reason, just one good reason, to put an end to her threat forever.

"Are you satisfied now, Selene?" asked Storm. "Because of your greed, nobody will benefit from the cure. Our kind will be as shunned and persecuted as ever."

Selene looked at her with cold contempt. "Get out of my building!" she said curtly.

"For now," said Wolverine, "gladly. But if the Beast dies, you can bet we'll be back."

The Black Queen turned away from him and swept towards the door at a dignified pace. Perhaps mindful of her recent defeat, however, she said nothing to provoke him further.

Blackheart's astral form faded away, leaving the four X-Men standing in glum silence. For long seconds, the only sound they could hear was the background hum of New York's nighttime traffic, carried into the ballroom on a cool breeze through the window that Phoenix had smashed. Then Nightcrawler shifted and groaned, and Cyclops went to tend to him.

"Where's Shaw?" asked Iceman suddenly.

Wolverine shrugged. "I haven't seen him since we moved the fight up here. He must have stayed behind in the throne room."

"You don't think he could have been captured?"

"No great loss if he has. Let Selene have her fun with him."

"No!" said Storm.

Wolverine looked at her, his brow furrowed, but the exclamation had not been meant for him. Ororo was already running past him, following in Selene's footsteps out into the hallway. However, she turned not towards the stairs but towards the doors that led out onto the street. Cyclops rose from Nightcrawler's side and called out her name in concern, but Wolverine dissuaded him from following her with a raised hand and a shake of his head.

"Leave her," he said. "It looks to me like she's got some unfinished business to deal with."

CHAPTER 15

SEBASTIAN SHAW scrambled out of the sewers in a back alleyway, a few blocks to the south of the Hellfire Club's mansion. For the sake of his dignity, he was glad that nobody was around to see him. The droning sound of helicopter blades would certainly have attracted the attention of any onlookers.

His assistant had arrived to collect him with her usual immaculate timing: even as he replaced the manhole cover, she was lowering the chopper into a hovering position above him. The end of a rope ladder fell beside him, its metal rungs clattering against each other as it unfolded itself. He clambered onto it and, sensing Tessa's telepathic presence, confirmed to her that he was on board.

The helicopter rose again as Shaw climbed the ladder towards it. He made awkward progress, only able to cling to the rungs with his left hand as his right still cradled the vial in its velvet wrapping. Nevertheless, he proceeded with the confidence of one who knew that even a fall from this height wouldn't hurt him.

Incoming at eleven o'clock, Tessa warned him. It appears we have company.

By now, Shaw had been lifted above the lights of New York City, and it took him a moment of squinting into the black sky before he discerned a flying cloaked figure. Storm.

He reached the top of the ladder and hauled himself through an open hatchway to find Tessa waiting for him. She was clad in full Hellfire Club regalia, her black hair piled up and held in place by pins. She gave him her full attention, waiting for his instructions.

He looked at her for a long moment, a hundred thoughts and images clashing inside his mind so that even he could not be sure what he was thinking.

At last, he brushed past her without so much as a nod of acknowledgement.

"Deal with the X-Man," he said gruffly.

The dark shape of the helicopter pulled away into the night, and Storm knew that Shaw had to be on board. She increased the ferocity of the wind that carried her, flying faster and faster. She pushed herself to her limit as if trying to outrun the uncomfortable fact that she didn't know why she was pursuing the Black King at all. All she did know was that, back in Selene's ballroom when she had realized that he must have fled, her stomach had performed a somersault. She was acting on instinct, surrendering to the part of herself that couldn't bear the thought of him leaving her like this. After everything they had been through, everything they had said to each other... She had to see him again.

And maybe, when she did, she might finally know what she wanted to say to him.

Sebastian does not wish to speak with you.

The rebuttal popped into her mind unbidden—placed there tele-pathically, she deduced, by Tessa. She ignored it. She was closing in upon her target.

This vehicle is equipped with armaments, persisted Tessa. Come closer, and I will be forced to take defensive measures.

Storm formed a response in her thoughts. *I am not leaving until I have spoken with Shaw.*

Your business with him is concluded.

I do not think so. Your employer made me an offer.

You do not belong in the Hellfire Club, Ororo. Storm was surprised to "hear" Tessa using her first name, and more surprised yet when she detected a genuine hint of sadness behind the telepath's words. *You may have been tempted by a vision of another world, but I suspect you have known all along that it is a world of which you could never be a*

part. Nor do you need to be. It would be best for all concerned if you did not pursue this matter.

Ororo was still trying to take all that in, still trying to work out what it meant, when a pair of missiles shot out of the helicopter's backside and streaked towards her. Avoiding them wasn't a problem—but mindful of the overpopulated city below, she also had to manipulate the air currents around them so as to set them down gently on a nearby flat rooftop. She would fetch Wolverine to deactivate the missiles safely later. Shaw's helicopter, in the meantime, had receded into the distance. She could have caught up to it again, but she was beginning to think that perhaps Tessa was right, that she should leave well enough alone.

She thought about Sage, the person that Tessa had become in a now-obsolete future. Perhaps she would become that person again. Only now did Ororo regret that she had not taken the time to question Sage about her ties with the X-Men, and about how far back they went.

For days, she had been asking herself what she might become if she were to join Shaw's Inner Circle, even for the purest of motives. She had wondered if she could live the life of a double agent or if it would consume her; how many compromises she would have to make. Blackheart's dream reality, little as she could remember about it, had failed to answer that question, showing her only what she had wanted to see. But perhaps, she thought now, the answer had been in front of her all along and she just hadn't noticed it.

She took a long detour on her way back to the Hellfire Club building, not wishing to see her fellow X-Men again until she had imposed some order upon her chaotic thoughts.

Shaw had charmed her into believing that he was not beyond redemption. But the White Knight—the Shaw of the future—had lied to her. And the younger Shaw had never told her how he had come to usurp his older self. Ororo had her

suspensions, but she hardly liked to think about them. She had been reminded of how ruthless Shaw could be: she certainly could not trust him, and she realized now that she would never have been able to change him. It was far more likely that, given the right circumstances, he would have changed her.

He had not waited for an answer to his proposal. It had probably been this, more than anything, that had prompted her to take to the air and follow him. Unfinished business. She had been looking for a sense of closure. But Tessa had been right about another thing: in her heart, she had known that she could never have become Shaw's White Queen. She had known it ever since she had challenged him in that abandoned office alongside Battery Park, when he had turned up in the White Knight's costume. Perhaps even before that.

She couldn't help but wonder how long he had known it too.

When the Beast awoke, he was lying flat on his back in a bed. A drip was attached to his left hand, and a band around his right arm monitored his blood pressure. He felt empty, like a sack of flesh with no substance, and his head was stuffed with cotton wool-but his overwhelming feeling was one of joy. He was alive.

As his vision cleared, two shapes came into focus. Moira MacTaggart and Bobby Drake were sitting by his bedside. He did not recognize the room behind them, but his nose detected the familiar antiseptic scent of hospitals everywhere. "Is it... all over?" he asked weakly.

"You don't have to worry about a thing, Hank," Moira assured him. "The X-Men dealt with Selene, and you're on your way back to being fighting fit."

"Jeannie got you here just in time," chipped in Bobby. "She sat with you until she was sure you were out of the woods."

“We’ll transfer you to the infirmary at the school as soon as we can,” said Moira. “A few days’ rest there and you’ll be fine.”

“It’s a good thing Moira was still in New York,” said Bobby. “She took over here and made sure you got the best treatment. She did the operation herself.”

Moira shot him a silencing look; obviously, she had not wanted Hank to hear that information just yet. He smiled to show her that he wasn’t upset. “I took it as read that you must have performed a transfusion. May I assume that the medical staff of this establishment were less than thrilled at the prospect of exposing themselves to my mutant blood?”

“When they heard you’d had the Legacy Virus...” said Moira apologetically.

“I understand,” said Hank. There was no use getting angry about such things; not if he couldn’t change them. “And ...” He didn’t want to ask the question, but he knew he had to. He summoned up his courage and forced the words from his throat. “... the cure?”

Moira laid a gentle hand on his, and shook her head sadly.

Hank didn’t know how to feel. Things could have been a lot worse, he knew that-but still, he couldn’t quite accept that he had worked so hard, suffered so much, for nothing. He thought about the funeral he had attended in the small town of Newhill, Massachusetts-less than a fortnight ago, although it felt like much longer. A young man had been buried that day: a non-mutant by all accounts, but he had fallen victim to the Legacy Virus nonetheless.

Hank knew that there would be more funerals.

“You should have taken more of my blood!” he insisted as if, in his anguish, he could turn back time and make it happen.

“You had none to spare,” said Moira, “and the reaction in your bloodstream had probably run its course anyway.”

"You might have been able to salvage the super-cell before it extinguished itself!"

She responded with a firm shake of her head. "A small chance, at the expense of your life. No, Hank. You might be prepared to play those odds, but I'm certainly not."

"We took the cure away from Selene," said Bobby in an optimistic tone, hoping to inject some cheer into the conversation, "that's the main thing."

"He's right, you know," said Moira. "We don't have to make compromises, Hank. You don't have to put your life on the line and you don't have to throw in your lot with the likes of Shaw. You've developed a cure once, you can do it again."

Behind her words was the unspoken implication: *I won't let you feel guilty about being cured while I'm still dying.*

"But the data from the Kree computer... it's ..."

"Lost, yes-but we still have our memories, Hank. I learned a lot beneath that island, and I'm sure you did too. I've got a dozen new ideas to try out-and as soon as you're up and about again, I expect you to come out to Muir Island and help me."

Hank grinned and, miraculously, he felt some of the pain and frustration of the past two weeks draining away. "You can count on it, Doctor MacTaggart," he said.

A weary Jean Grey returned home at last, to the building that was presently known as the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning, in the small Westchester town of Salem Center. Even as she stepped into the hallway, however, she heard raised voices coming from the direction of the lounge. Cyclops and Wolverine were at loggerheads, as usual. She hesitated at the lounge door and listened. It had been a long couple of days. She was tired, and she didn't know if she had the spirit to mediate between her husband and her friend again.

"You were taking one hell of a risk!" said Cyclops.

"Depends how much value you place on Selene's life," came Wolverine's curt response. "Me, I wouldn't give you a plugged nickel for it."

"She could have been a valuable hostage against Blackheart." "Turns out she was more use to us dead, though, doesn't it?" Jean nodded to herself as she understood what the row was about. Wolverine had murdered the future Selene in cold blood. Regardless of how things had turned out, it wasn't in Scott Summers' nature to let such an action pass without comment.

"And what if you'd been wrong? What if killing her hadn't reversed the effects of the spell? What if we'd had to live with the consequences?"

"I *wasn't* wrong-and that's what burns you, isn't it Summers! Your poor liberal conscience can't cope with the fact that taking out Selene was the right thing to do."

"What 'bums me,' Logan, is that you acted against my explicit orders."

"I saw a chance. I took it."

"You should have discussed it with me first."

"Oh yeah, sure. And we'd have been standing in the wreckage of Manhattan right now, still yakking about Selene's human rights with half our team lying dead around us."

"Or we might have found a better way to resolve the situation." A door opened on the upper floor, and Rogue's voice drifted down the staircase: "Bathroom's free!" Cyclops and Wolverine continued to argue, apparently not having heard her. It didn't take Jean long to convince herself that it would serve them both right if she left them to it and jumped the queue. A hot bath and a long sleep, that was what she needed.

She stifled a deep yawn and fought to keep her eyes open as she climbed the stairs. Cyclops's muffled voice followed her. "You went too far, Logan. You took a gamble. Next time, you might not be so lucky."

“And next time,” returned Wolverine, “you might not have someone around to do what has to be done for you. The whole world could suffer for your squeamishness.”

Jean found the familiar rhythms of the exchange oddly comforting. She knew that nothing would be resolved today. Scott and Logan would each remain as intractable as the other.

And she smiled to herself as she realized that she would have it no other way.

The helicopter had transported Shaw and Tessa to an airfield, where they and their pilot had transferred to a private Hellfire Club jet for the long flight back to Hong Kong Island. The plush quarters at the rear of the plane contained a freezer cabinet, into which Shaw had placed the vial of blood. It would have to be analyzed to confirm that the vital super-cell was still present, but he was fairly confident that he had succeeded beyond his own expectations.

He had procured the Legacy Virus cure for himself, and neither the X-Men nor Selene even knew that he had it. Not only that but, during her brief contact with Storm’s mind, Tessa had discerned that

Shaw’s enemies believed the cure lost altogether. It was his and his alone.

For once, however, he could not turn his thoughts to the future. They were mired in the past, and specifically in the cold cemetery where he had come face to face with his destiny.

He couldn’t close his eyes, because when he did he found himself back there, standing over Donald Pierce’s corpse, the barrel of a gun pointed at his head. He felt his muscles tensing as time seemed to stop. His gaze was riveted upon the finger of his future self as he watched it closing inexorably around the trigger. He acted a microsecond before he heard the retort, his heart hammering against his chest as he leapt beneath the deadly pellet. He broke out in a cold sweat of relief as he realized

that, against all odds, he had survived. He pushed his tired and weakened legs as hard as he could to propel himself at his attacker before he could let off another shot. He didn't quite make it, but the second pellet missed too, and Shaw felt the soft brush of the White-or rather, the Black-Knight's jacket against his shoulder.

The momentum of his charge had been sapped, of course, but he had expected as much. He wrapped his arms around his future self's torso, looped a foot around his leg and stole his footing. The two Shaws fell onto the hard ground and rolled over and over, locked together, each fighting to end up atop the other. But the present-day Shaw had exhausted his strength on Pierce and Deathstrike, while his other self was fresh and fully charged.

He ended up on his back, his opponent sitting on his chest and pinning his arms down with his knees. The future Shaw had dropped his gun during the struggle, but his hands were around his younger self's throat, his thumbs pressing down with unbearable force. There was no kinetic energy involved in this type of attack, nothing for Shaw to leech off. In his enervated state, he could only wait for the pressure on his windpipe to suffocate him.

"I don't expect you to believe this," said his future self through gritted teeth, "but I'm doing this for your-for *our*-own good. I'm saving you."

"From... what?" croaked Shaw. He had managed to tear one hand free from beneath his attacker's knee, and he used it in a futile attempt to unfurl the fingers that were choking him.

"Yourself."

"I've told you, I won't... become you!" The very idea that he could have anything in common with this spineless, wretched creature revolted him.

"You will. You won't be able to help yourself. It starts with a small compromise. You can tell yourself you're biding your time, serving the Black Queen only until you see an

opportunity to depose her. But the days turn into weeks and the weeks into months and years, and the opportunity never arises. And with each day, you're forced to make another small compromise, to abase yourself further and further until there is nothing you would not do in the name of self-preservation. And then, one day, you'll realize that you are no longer biding your time, no longer playing a part; this has become your life. You are a cowering slave, eking out a pitiful existence in squalor and misery and there is no way back for you."

"I'd ... rather... die," spat Shaw with all the venom he could muster.

"I know," said his future self-and the haunted look in his eyes was enough to make Shaw cease his struggles for a moment.

"Do you think," continued the unmasked White Knight, "that every time I look in a mirror, I don't see what you are seeing now? I used to have such dreams. I used to believe the future would be mine. Now, my only dream is to destroy the past. I disgust myself!"

"Not... as much as ... you disgust me ..." Shaw freed his other hand, and his fingertips brushed against something on the ground beside him. Something heavy and metallic. It had to be the gun. He reached for it, his muscles straining, but he couldn't quite get a grip on it.

"I used to be a successful businessman," his future self lamented. "I used to command respect. That's how I want the world to remember me; not like this. Never like this."

Shaw felt the pressure on his windpipe lessening as his would-be killer's resolve was eroded by self-pity. He seized his chance. He pushed at the elder Shaw's chin with the heels of both hands and forced his head back. He squirmed beneath the weight of his opponent's body, thus unbalanced; he brought up his knees and managed to shift himself a valuable inch to the right before the grip on his throat was reasserted. His future self's face was a mask of

insane hatred that must surely have been mirrored in Shaw's own determined expression.

He wasn't prepared to die like this.

He reached for the gun again, and this time he was close enough to pick it up.

The elder Shaw relinquished his hold and blanched as his younger self interposed the weapon between them. The weapon that had been designed to kill him.

Shaw's throat was burning and he couldn't speak, but he didn't need words to convey his intentions. His attacker scrambled to his feet and backed away nervously. Shaw stood too and followed him slowly, his eyes narrowed, his lips set into a grim line and the gun leveled unwaveringly at his future self. The elder Shaw came to a halt as he backed into the wooden marker of his son's grave and almost toppled backwards over it.

"You can't do it," he insisted in a breathless whisper. "If you kill me now, you'll end up here yourself. It *will* happen, one day."

It was the worst thing he could have said.

Shaw opened his eyes with a start. The image of his own death was too stark, too disturbing. But he couldn't so easily dismiss the expression of horror on the face of his distorted reflection as the tiny pellet had exploded at his chest, splaying itself across his soiled white waistcoat. He hadn't even tried to tear it off, knowing that it was already too late, that the deadly nanites were already digging their way into his flesh.

The scream had come a second later, the elder Shaw doubling up as he fell to his knees, his arms clutched around his stomach in agony. Then his head had snapped backwards, his spine arching until it had seemed as if it must break. Tears had leaked from his wild, madly staring eyes and drool from his mouth as he had fallen onto his side and twitched like a swatted insect. The scream had tailed off into a throaty whine, but it had not stopped.

Shaw feared that, in his mind, the scream would never stop.

After he had killed himself, he had staggered away through the headstones and been violently and repeatedly sick. He had sat on the hard ground with his knees up to his chest, staring at nothing. He had lost track of time, but at least an hour had passed before he had been able to return, before he had stooped beside the cold corpse of his future self and begun to strip his white clothes from him with trembling hands.

It had been an arduous and gruesome task, but by now Shaw had rediscovered his resolve. He had known what he had to do. He had sworn to himself that this future would never come to pass, that he would fight it until the last breath in his body. He would take on Fate itself, and he would win.

He had busted open a dilapidated janitor's shed in the corner of the cemetery grounds, and found tools within. He had laid his victim to rest a few feet above his son. But before he had refilled the grave, before he had cast that first shovel full of soil, he had hesitated. He had taken a final look down at the image of his own face, pale and lined but at peace at last. And he had wondered if he had given his future self what he had wanted after all.

Perhaps the elder Shaw had missed with those pellets on purpose. Perhaps he hadn't really wanted to kill his past self, but rather to galvanize him, to renew his sense of purpose. For all his talk of predestination, perhaps he had hoped that the course of his life could be changed after all. Or perhaps that was just what Shaw wanted to believe now.

The aircraft gave a sudden shake as a loud clunk reverberated around its hull. It could just have been turbulence, but it paid to be cautious-and in any case, Shaw was glad of the distraction. He levered himself out of his comfortable seat and made his way forward to the cabin. He never reached it.

The door in front of him was flung open, and a horribly familiar figure barred his path. Standing behind the new arrival, Tessa gave her employer a helpless, apologetic shrug.

The man was taller than Shaw, and his bulky costume made him appear larger and more imposing still. He was dressed in regal colors of red and purple, and a cloak of the latter hue swept down from his shoulders. A red metal helmet encased his head but left his features visible. His face bore the lines of age and the deeper scars of experience, but his eyes burnt with a zealous and dangerous white fire.

This was the man with whom Shaw had forged a reluctant alliance; the man who had raised an island from the seabed for him and helped to finance his research into a Legacy cure; the man with whom he had had no intention of sharing his spoils. He had known that this meeting was inevitable, but he had not expected it to happen so soon. He hadn't expected his so-called partner to board his plane in mid-flight and confront him like this.

"I believe you have something for me," said Magneto.

He didn't wait for an answer. Without taking his eyes off Shaw, he extended a purple-gloved hand to point across the compartment. Magnetic forces crackled around the freezer cabinet in the corner, and its metal lid sprang up with such force that it almost flew off its hinges. The precious vial rose up from within, and sailed through the air into Magneto's grasp. The vial itself was made of glass, and it took Shaw a moment to deduce that the master of magnetism had controlled the iron in the Beast's blood itself to summon it to him.

"Very well done, Shaw." Magneto sounded as if he were congratulating a particularly dim pupil who had finally got a piece of work right. "You have redeemed your mistakes; you have outwitted both Selene and the X-Men." A smile

softened his sharp features, but his eyes burnt no less intensely. "I was beginning to wonder if you had it in you."

With each condescending word, Shaw's hatred for his unwanted ally grew deeper. He wanted to hit him, to take the hard-earned cure back from him, to wipe the smile from his face. But he held himself back. Magneto's physical power was too great. It would take cunning and careful planning to outmaneuver him. Fortunately, Shaw knew how to be patient. His time would come.

He forced a polite smile as he showed his guest to a seat—but once Magneto's back was turned to him, the smile fell away and he breathed in deeply to suppress his building anger.

And that was when he made the mistake of closing his eyes again.

Again, he saw the wretched figure that he had once become. He saw the pain, the regret and, worst of all, the weakness in his future self's eyes, and he could hear his voice. It rang in his ears and vibrated around his skull.

"It starts with a small compromise."

When Shaw opened his eyes again, Magneto was filling a chair, his arms and legs spread confidently across the cushions. He had removed his helmet to reveal a head of steely gray hair, and he was directing an equally steely stare at his host. Shaw fixed his smile onto his lips again and said, "Perhaps you would care for a drink?"

Magneto shook his head. "We have much to discuss." He returned the vial to the freezer cabinet with a wave of his hand, and settled back in his seat.

"We have the power to cure the Legacy Virus," he said. "Now, at last, we can put the next stage of my plan into operation."

TO BE CONCLUDED

X-MEr

THE LEGACY QUEST TRILOGY: BOOK 3

CHAPTER 1

HE BLACK King of Hong Kong stood in his rooftop garden and surveyed his domain.

The landscape of this small island had changed a great deal in the four and a half decades of the King's lifetime. Its trees now jostled for position with towering constructs of glass and concrete, some of the tallest skyscrapers outside of New York City. But at night, in Sebastian Shaw's eyes, it remained one of the most beautiful places in the world.

T

He had spent a lot of time up here recently, in the pagoda atop the wide, single-story Hellfire Club building, just gazing out over the lights of Hong Kong Island and thinking.

He fancied he had much in common with Hong Kong. On the outside, he too was a mixture of the old and the new. His company, Shaw Industries, had made him rich by remaining on the cutting edge of technology. As a Lord Cardinal of the Hellfire Club's Inner Circle, however, he clad himself in old-fashioned finery. Currently, he was wearing a maroon smoking jacket and cummerbund, gray breeches and a white silk shirt and cravat. His black hair was tied back into a ponytail, secured by a red bow. This "uniform" may have appeared idiosyncratic, but it symbolized his organization's allegiance to the morals of a bygone era. The Hellfire Club had been birthed in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century, at a time when—in Shaw's view—a man's ambition had been limited only by his strength and determination to succeed. Today, great men had to contend

with a multitude of strictures placed upon them by the less able and jealous.

Despite this, Shaw—like Hong Kong—had built himself from humble beginnings into a significant political and economic force. Through the Hellfire Club, he pulled the strings of businessmen and government officials alike. But, like Hong Kong, he had seen a lot of changes recently-and not all of them had been for the better.

Something alerted him to the presence of an intruder in his garden. He wasn't sure what it was; it hadn't been a sight or a sound. But Shaw hadn't lived this long without developing an instinct for such things. He turned slowly, a composed expression fixed upon his face, one eyebrow raised in mild query. He would not give a potential foe the satisfaction of seeing him disconcerted. He did not bother to disguise his distaste, however, when he laid eyes upon the mutant sorceress known as Selene.

She hadn't deigned to visit him in person, of course. "Sebastian, my dear," she purred, her thin red lips twisting into a mocking grin on her pale face, "I am beginning to get the impression that you are trying to avoid me. You won't return my calls; I have been forced to send my astral form over eight thousand miles to get your attention."

"I have nothing to say to you, Selene," he snarled.

"Oh, come now. I know you are making plans to celebrate the forthcoming solstice. You have been in contact with Kings and Queens of the Hellfire Club worldwide, and yet you have overlooked our most powerful branch. Why is that, I wonder?"

Shaw bristled at the well-chosen words. Selene had been his Black Queen once; he had ruled the New York Hellfire Club with her at his side. Even after she had betrayed him, he had given her another chance. But now, the treacherous witch ruled in New York alone-and as much as he loved Hong Kong, it felt like a poor consolation prize.

Shaw had spent most of his life moving forward; a few temporary setbacks had not worried him much at first. But increasingly, it seemed that he was having to fight harder and harder to keep what he had, let alone reclaim what had once been his. He had tried to rebuild his diminished power base, but his most audacious schemes had been thwarted by his many opponents, and his reborn Inner Circle had fallen apart around him.

He had thought about giving it all up. He had almost resigned from the Club itself more than once, but that would have been a backward step. It would have meant throwing away a lifelong dream, and he hadn't yet found a new dream, a new plan, with which to replace it.

Three weeks ago, Shaw had taken a trip to the future. He had seen what he was destined to become, and he had been appalled. He had sworn to avoid that fate somehow.

Selene moved closer to him, the lights from below shining through her black cloak and her faintly translucent body. "You can't still bear a grudge against me for our last encounter?"

"You stole something from me," Shaw reminded her. "Something of great value."

Selene laughed. "The X-Men had backed you into a corner, Shaw. All the resources you put into finding a cure for the Legacy Virus, all the sacrifices you made, and they were about to take it from under your nose."

"I had agreed to share my discovery with them."

"You and I both know, Shaw, that that cure was only useful to our organization if we could exercise sole control over it."

"I see," sneered Shaw. "You expect me to believe that you were trying to help me; that your theft of the cure was in some way staged to fool the X-Men?"

"What use is the Hellfire Club if its branches cannot support each other?"

It was an obvious lie-and all the more so because Shaw had seen the future, or at least a possible version of it. He had seen what Selene had intended to do with the Legacy cure, and he had seen himself humiliated by her. The memory of it sent a shiver down his spine. "It was thanks to your interference," he said tartly, "that the cure was lost."

"We played the game," said Selene as if it didn't matter. "It ended in stalemate. At least the prize was not claimed by those whelps." "You are a mutant, Selene, as am I. The Legacy Virus was designed to attack our kind. We are dying out because of it-and you snatched away our only hope of salvation."

She waved a dismissive hand. "The strong will survive, as we always have."

"We may have been allies in the past," said Shaw coldly, "but no longer."

She frowned. "You're up to something, Shaw. I know it—and I will find out what it is."

"I am merely organizing a party," he said with a false smile.

He turned his back to her, and looked out across the island again. It was a calculated insult, about which Selene, in her insubstantial form, could only seethe. She couldn't even read his mind. She couldn't know that he had deceived her as she had tried to deceive him.

She didn't know that the cure to the Legacy Vims still existed after all.

Eventually, sensing that the witch had gone, Shaw let out a controlled sigh. Selene had been right about one thing. He *had* been reluctant to deal with the X-Men—and her attack had presented him with a welcome opportunity. Now they, like she, believed the precious cure destroyed, and he was rid of their interference.

To his continuing frustration, however, the prize was not yet his alone.

In the course of his quest to cure the Legacy Virus, he had acted as he always did. He had made alliances where they seemed prudent, using and discarding people like pieces on a chessboard. But some pieces were more powerful than others, and more difficult to discard at the game's end.

Shaw had not intended to share his prize with anybody, but he had been outmaneuvered. And his current partner's plans for the cure scared even him.

He stayed in the pagoda for a few minutes longer, hands clasped behind his back, his expression stoic although nobody was around to see it. He listened to the calming orchestral music that drifted up from the Hellfire Club's ballroom, and he breathed in the warm evening air and basked in a gentle breeze.

Hong Kong, arguably, enjoyed its most pleasant weather in the final weeks of the year, when the burning heat of Summer had subsided. But Sebastian Shaw still yearned for the biting winds and the snow of New York.

Shaw had kept his visitors waiting for over an hour. It was his way of showing his contempt for them, and his power over them.

He greeted them, at last, in his office, seated behind his desk with his fingers forming a steeple in front of his nose and mouth. A ceiling fan beat the air and caused the bamboo blinds behind him to clatter against the window. The wall hummed with the continuing strains of the music behind it.

The woman was well known to him: Emma Frost was another remnant of an Inner Circle that had once been unbeatable. She was wearing the white bodice, the thigh-length boots and fur-trimmed cloak of the White Queen. Her blonde hair hung straight down to her shoulders, framing a face that was young but already hard and cold.

The man was less familiar, although Shaw recognized him. He too was dressed in white, but he seemed

uncomfortable in the high collar and starched shirt of his formal Hellfire Club attire. He appeared to be a normal, middle-aged man with deep frown lines etched into a grim face and dark brown hair swept back from his forehead. But appearances were deceptive. Daimon Hellstrom was the mortal son of a powerful demon—and despite his calm demeanor, Shaw fancied that he could detect a hint of brimstone about him.

His personal assistant, Tessa, announced the pair in her usual prim manner. She took up a position at her master's shoulder, lips pursed, hands tucked into the sleeves of her kimono. Her innocent eyes betrayed none of the furious activity of her enhanced brain. Shaw thought of her as his living computer, possessed as she was of a phenomenal memory and analytical skills. She also had rudimentary telepathic abilities, and he could feel her presence in his mind. She had built a wall of static around it, boosting his psychic defenses. Frost was a more powerful telepath than Tessa—but if she wanted to read Shaw's thoughts now, she would have to fight for them.

Hellstrom extended a hand toward Shaw. He ignored it. With a curt, unsmiling nod, he indicated that his visitors should sit. He waited for them to break the awkward silence.

"We want to talk to you about your plans for the solstice," said Frost.

"Oh?" Shaw raised an eyebrow. "And of what concern are they to you?"

"I never formally resigned my post as White Queen," she reminded him.

"But you have shown little interest in Hellfire Club affairs of late."

"Perhaps it is time that changed."

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy in your actions, Miss Frost?" Shaw twisted his lips into a smile, but he didn't allow it to reach his eyes. "I spoke to your sister, Adrienne, only a few days ago. She is doing a fine job of rebuilding our

London branch. Unlike you, my dear, she will make an excellent White Queen.”

Her smoldering expression confirmed that he had hit a raw nerve. Was she regaining some of her old fire? He hoped so. Unlike many of his former allies, Emma Frost had never actually betrayed Shaw. She had simply disappointed him by proving to be weaker than he had thought. When her team of young mutants in training had been slaughtered, she had run into the waiting arms of Professor Charles Xavier, the X-Men’s altruistic founder. Now, she trained another team of youngsters, inculcating in them not the proud beliefs and the will to succeed of the Hellfire Club but rather Xavier’s own naive principles. It gave her a sense of purpose, a way to redeem the mistakes of her past. She needed that for now. But Shaw wondered how much longer it could last, how long before she returned to the fold.

“As for you, Mr. Hellstrom,” he continued, “you appointed yourself to the rank of White King of the Inner Circle in New York. Selene does not recognize your position, and nor do I.”

Hellstrom spoke in a low, threatening rumble like a building storm. “I would have expected you of all people to appreciate the need for a balancing force to Selene’s Black house.”

“And where were you, Mr. Hellstrom, when your Black Queen launched a brazen attack upon me and stole the cure to the Legacy Virus?”

His eyes flickered downward. "I was... otherwise engaged."

"The point is," said Frost firmly, "that we still have contacts in the Hellfire Club, and we are both concerned about the rumors we are hearing."

Shaw got to his feet abruptly. "As these 'contacts' of yours have no doubt told you," he said with an air of scorn, "the Hellfire Club is indeed planning to mark the solstice in two days' time. At the hour of midnight in each of their respective time zones, our major branches will launch specially designed fireworks that will erupt at the upper edge of the atmosphere. Each firework will create a pyrotechnic display in the shape of a giant Hellfire Club trident. As one trident fades, another will be created as midnight strikes in another locale. From Sydney in the east to Hawaii in the west, our symbol will light the night as it moves across the sky. It will be visible to all."

"And this... this cheap publicity stunt is so important to you that you have traveled the world to supervise the preparations in person?" Hellstrom's disbelief was plain.

Shaw clasped his hands behind his back and walked around his desk. "Our organization has been sorely tested in recent years. I felt it was time to make a statement, to boost the morale of our remaining loyal members." He reached the door and opened it, giving his visitors a meaningful look. The pair rose from their chairs, but they made no move to leave.

Frost shook her head. "I know you, Shaw. You are power-hungry but never this vain. You would not go to this much trouble simply to massage your ego. You are hiding something."

Shaw gave an indifferent shrug. "To our pagan ancestors, the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year—was a time to celebrate the rebirth of the sun. Here in the southern hemisphere, of course, it is the height of summer; nevertheless, what better time to reaffirm our allegiance to

a proud tradition and to announce our own symbolic rebirth?"

Frost fixed him with an icy glare, and he had no doubt that she was worming her psychic tendrils into his mind, looking for the information that he was keeping from her. By now, she would have found Tessa's shields. She could choose to withdraw quietly or she could show her hand by bludgeoning her way through them and taking what she wanted by force. Once, she would have done the latter without hesitation. Shaw was faintly saddened, then, when she dropped her gaze to the floor, defeated. She had spent too long with Xavier and his ilk.

"On the night of the twenty-first of December," said Shaw, "the wealthy elite of every civilized country in the world will enjoy the biggest and best party that even the Hellfire Club has ever thrown. Neither of you, I regret to say, are invited."

Hellstrom's eyes flashed as he clenched and unclenched his fists. "We will find out the truth, Shaw, one way or another."

"You are welcome to try." Shaw was well aware that Hellstrom had the physical power to destroy him. Like Frost, however, he did not have the will to use it. He held the inner rage that was part of his demonic heritage at bay. He was not ruthless enough. That was why the Black King would always better his rivals in the long run.

"Your arrogance will be your undoing one day," snarled Hellstrom. "So I am often assured. Now, if there is nothing more, I am extremely busy..."

With a tight smile, Shaw motioned his visitors out through the door—and this time, they took the hint and left.

The White King and Queen swept out of the Hellfire Club building, framed by the light from its veranda behind them. They marched down a short flight of wide steps and passed the fire-breathing stone dragons that stood sentry at the entranceway. Their anachronistic costumes drew hardly a

glance: this area of Hong Kong was relatively secluded, and most of the people on the street were Club members joining or leaving its night-long revels. The balmy air deadened the harsh sounds of slamming car doors and drunken giggling.

Hellstrom let out a sigh of exasperation. "That man tries my resolve. I have half a mind to go back in there and coax his secrets from his lips with hellfire."

"Patience, Daimon," said Frost. "The way to deal with Shaw is not with physical force. He will already have set his scheme in motion. Unless you are prepared to kill him-and perhaps not even then-you won't stop it." She allowed the hint of a smile to tug at her lips. "In any case, we never expected him to confess to everything, did we?" "I presume you weren't able to read his mind?"

"As we anticipated, his lapdog shielded it from me." Hellstrom looked despondent, until Frost continued: "However, young Tessa is not as adept a telepath as she would like to think. I did glean one important fact."

Hellstrom raised an eyebrow in her direction. "You don't sound entirely happy about it."

"I am not," said Frost shortly. "I don't know what Shaw's plans are, but he has not formulated them alone. His partner's name was close to the surface of his thoughts." She shook her head and muttered to herself: "I can hardly believe he would trust him again. I was there the first time, I remember what happened. But then Shaw has always been one to make a bargain of necessity. Always playing his games----"

Hellstrom cleared his throat, and Frost's eyes focused upon him as if her mind were returning from a faraway place. He didn't have to put his question into words.

The White Queen took a deep breath and said: "Shaw has allied himself with Magneto."

When Raul Jarrett had closed his eyes, he had expected it to be for the last time.

He had settled into a deep, dreamless sleep, his fear of the unknown tinged by relief as the pain had ebbed from his body at last. He had known little but pain all his adult life, and in some ways he had felt that death would be a blessing.

As a carefree child growing up in the prosperous city of Hammer Bay, he had never given much thought to the people who tended his garden, swept the streets and drove the trains and buses. He had known that his country, the East African island nation of Genosha, was blessed to have such individuals, such willing slaves whose paranormal abilities made them ideally suited to their menial tasks. But he had never spoken to one of these so-called mutants. He had never wondered where they came from, nor where they went to after sundown.

He had never imagined that he, Raul Jarrett, the youngest son of a well-heeled, well-connected family, could have become one of them.

The darkness lightened, and he was aware of himself again, lying on his back. His eyes were still closed, and he could hear nothing over the sound of his own breathing. This in itself was a puzzle: when consciousness had slipped away from him, he had been sprawled across a gurney in a filthy, narrow corridor in an overcrowded hospital, his ears full of the coughs and groans of the dying. Doctors and nurses had hurried by, but there had been too few of them and too many patients for them to spare time for a lost cause. His lungs had burnt as he had sucked in air, but now his chest felt as if a weight had been lifted from it. His muscles no longer ached. He began to wonder if he still had a body at all, or if he had passed into an afterlife. The thought unnerved him, and he didn't dare look to prove or disprove his theory. He remembered his mother bursting into tears as the magistrates arrived at his home, brandishing his test results. Gene-positive. He had been numb, disbelieving.

There had been no history of the mutant gene in his family; surely there had to have been a mistake?

He hadn't really understood what was happening at first-but he remembered the moment of sheer terror as they wheeled him into the operating room, the anaesthetic fighting to take hold. He had glimpsed the blurred face of the feared Genengineer above him and he had realized that, mistake or not, this was happening. It was happening to him. Just one moment. And after that he had felt nothing else, no strong emotions of any kind, for over a decade.

They had altered Raul Jarrett. They had activated his latent mutant gene and sculpted it, controlling its effects upon his body. They had needed somebody to speed up mining operations beneath the Ridge-back Mountains—somebody who could chase seams of iron ore into areas that even the air could hardly penetrate-so they had given him the power to stretch himself into a narrow thread and to store oxygen reserves in his stomach. They had bonded a skinsuit to his flesh, to afford him protection from the harsh conditions underground and to mark him out inexorably as a creature without rights. They had shaved his head and tampered with his brain so that he had accepted his new station unquestioningly. He had followed the magistrates' orders and devoted himself to his country even though his bones had protested with each use of his newfound abilities. He had ignored the shooting pains and the knowledge that the work was killing him. And only in his feverish dreams had he recalled the life that he had once lived.

To all intents and purposes, Raul Jarrett had been dead then. He had become Mutate #6014.

It was an unbearable irony to him that he had clawed his way back to life only to be singled out by a cruel Fate-or a vengeful deity-again.

In truth, he had seen little of the mutate rebellion. He had spent most of that bewildering, turbulent time cowering in his squalid little cell in the settlement zone in the

Genoshan Highlands. He had not joined in the fight against the magistrates, he had not risked his life— but at least he had won the inner struggle against their conditioning, and he had been proud of his small triumph. And if his county had no longer been the Utopian land of his youth, if its slave-based economy had collapsed and its streets had been claimed by fear and looting and arbitrary death, then at least he had been Raul Jarrett again. He had been free.

But that was before the Legacy Virus. That was before the mutate population of Genosha had been targeted again, and this time they had had nobody to rebel against.

“How are you feeling?”

Jarrett felt a cool hand on his forehead, and his eyes flickered open. He blinked uncomprehendingly. He was in a clean, well-lit room. It wasn't large-but at the public hospital, an area of this size would have held at least five beds, not just one. Standing beside him was a slender young woman with short blonde hair. Genosha's former slaves no longer wore their numbers, but her purple skinsuit betrayed her nature nonetheless. Some mutates had been quick to shed the symbols of their servitude, despite the long and difficult operation involved. Others, like Jarrett himself, had decided to wait until an easier way to reverse the bonding process had been found. Once the Legacy epidemic had begun to soak up their country's resources, of course, they had had no choice in the matter.

There had been a movement toward reclaiming the skinsuits as a symbol of racial pride. Many people still wore them openly, and kept their heads bald, proclaiming their identities to the world. They were mutates: no longer something lower than the common herd of humanity, but something better.

“I'm Jenny Ransome,” said the woman, and Jarrett felt his eyes widening. He recognized her name. She was the chancellor of the new government; the government formed by the man who had been heralded as his country's savior.

She must have known what he was thinking, because she smiled and said: "I was a nurse before the war. You're in safe hands."

"I can't... feel anything. . . ." he murmured.

The woman frowned. "Nothing at all?"

"I mean ... no pain ... it doesn't hurt any more. . . Jarrett's tone was full of wonder. He felt strange. Empty, somehow, and numb. He flexed his fingers and toes, and was pleased to find that his body was the right shape. In recent weeks, as the virus had progressed and stolen his control over his powers, his limbs had lengthened and become weaker, and he had been unable to pull them back together. By the time he had been taken into the hospital, even standing had been beyond him. He had lain across the gurney like a tangle of overtensed elastic.

Jenny Ransome smiled again. "We tried a new treatment. We injected a special type of cell into your bloodstream. It fought off the Legacy Virus and reversed the damage it had done within a matter of hours."

"You mean I'm ... cured?" He hardly dared voice the hope. "The virus won't come back?"

"It's too early to be sure," said Jenny, "but the indications are positive. Very positive indeed. Raul—your name is Raul, isn't it?-there's somebody here who wants to see you."

Jarrett couldn't imagine who she might be talking about. He had no close friends. During his years of enslavement, he had been forbidden to speak with other human beings unless spoken to, and he had known his fellow mutants only by their numbers. Since his liberation, he had enjoyed a certain kinship with those who shared his situation—but, like many of them, he had needed time to build up his confidence. The virus had denied him that time.

He thought about his family. He didn't know if they had survived the war or not. They had been forced to disown him, but perhaps they had not forgotten him after all. He wondered if he would still recognize them.

A tall, cloaked figure strode confidently into the room, and Jarrett's heart leapt into his throat. This was the last person he had expected to see, especially here, especially taking an interest in him. For a second, he thought he was dreaming. Perhaps the virus had claimed him after all, and this was some form of fever-induced hallucination?

"Mr. Raul Jarrett, I presume?" said Magneto.

Raul nodded nervously. His jaw was working, but his throat had seized up and he was unable to talk. Magneto looked every inch a king, clad in royal colors of red and purple. His hair was gray, and his face lined by age and bitter experience—but as he towered over the room's single bed, Jarrett saw that his eyes were steely with resolve. Beneath one arm, he held the metal helmet that had become such a potent symbol to the people of Genosha. Resembling a gladiator's headgear of old, it indicated that Magneto was not afraid to fight for his beliefs—indeed, that he would make a formidable opponent.

Raul Jarrett had never seen this man in person before, but he had heard much about him. Magneto was a mutant himself, the master of magnetism. He was Genosha's new ruler, and reputedly the hope of the mutate race. In recent days, however, Jarrett had come to doubt this. Believing himself on the verge of death, he had cursed this so-called Savior, this man who had offered only false hope. Now, he felt as if his troubles had been but a test of faith, and he feared that Magneto could look into his soul or read his mind and see that he had failed.

"M-my liege ..he managed to croak.

"You look as if your condition has improved. I trust you are feeling well?"

The nurse, Jenny, came to his aid. "Mr. Jarrett is feeling much better, Your Eminence. I still have a few tests to run, but he appears to be in perfect health."

"Thank you, Jennifer." The ghost of a smile softened Magneto's features. Belatedly, Jarrett wondered if he should

get out of his bed and kneel, but the Savior did not seem to require it. "You, Mr. Jarrett," he said, "are privileged. You are the first of our people to receive the Legacy cure. Now that I am assured of its effectiveness, we will begin mass production. Genosha will be rid of this pestilence at last."

The Savior turned abruptly, his purple cloak billowing out behind him. As he marched back to the door, he said: "Let Mr. Jarrett rest now, Jennifer. Bring him to me tomorrow."

Jarrett's breath caught in his throat. He realized now where he had to be: in Hammer Bay, inside the former magistrate base that Magneto had converted into his command center. But what was he doing here? Why had he, of all the dying mutants, been singled out? What could the Savior want with somebody like him?

"Los Angeles and Madrid both report that preparations are complete." Shaw had asked Tessa to update him on the day's events; she stood before his desk and recited the details from memory, but he was hardly listening to her. He was thinking about Magneto, the man who had taken over his life. He was thinking about a future in which he had seen himself crushed beneath the heel of a despotic ruler, and he was trying to convince himself that it would not happen again. "Scribe has been in touch from the London branch," continued Tessa, "asking questions. I dealt with her. And apparently, Selene has paid a visit to the White Bishop of Boston, but he could tell her nothing. Sebastian?"

Realizing that his assistant was staring at him, Shaw refocused his attention upon her.

"There are no urgent matters to attend to," she said. "Would you prefer to do this tomorrow?"

He nodded wearily, his chin still cradled in his hands. "Thank you, Tessa."

She turned to leave, but he stopped her by speaking her name again. "Would I be right to assume," he said in a low, silken voice, settling back into his seat, "that you allowed Miss Frost to take some information from my mind earlier?"

It was rarely possible to read Tessa's feelings; she knew how to retain her composure in the most trying of circumstances. She had learned that from him. But Shaw's question caught her unawares, and there was no mistaking the fear that flickered across her features.

"Sir?" She frowned as if she hadn't understood him.

"You don't have to play games with me, Tessa," said Shaw. "I am not angry with you. I merely need to know exactly what it is that our enemies have learned."

"I... I apologize if I overstepped the mark," said Tessa, "but it was clear to me that you are not happy with your partner's plans for the Legacy cure. I thought that, if somebody else could deal with him.. .

"So, Frost and Hellstrom are aware of Magneto's involvement in my plans."

"But no more than that, sir, I swear."

Shaw nodded. "Very well, Tessa. You may leave me now."

She stared at him uncertainly for a moment, before she did as she was bidden. .

Alone now, Shaw closed his tired eyes and sighed heavily. When he had accused his assistant of betraying him, he had only halfexpected to be proved right. He had long thought of Tessa as his most loyal servant. He had trusted her, and Sebastian Shaw's trust was not lightly given. But his trip to the future had taught him something about her too.

He could not trust anybody now.

Frost would undoubtedly contact Xavier and his followers. After all Shaw's efforts to remove the X-Men from the board, they would rejoin the game. He ought to have been irritated about that-but a part of him suspected that, whatever Tessa's motives, she had made the right move.

Thanks to the X-Men's renewed involvement, Shaw might yet claim a victory after all.

CHAPTER I

THE X-MAN known only as Rogue was standing in the underground throne room of Selene, the Black Queen of the

New York branch of the Hellfire Club,

When last she had been here, she hadn't had much time to take in her surroundings. She had been too busy fighting for her life against Selene's demonic cohort, Blackheart. He was looming over her now, a granite hand poised to kill her. His gigantic body almost filled the room, and his eyes burnt in the darkness of his face. He wanted the prize that Rogue was clutching to her chest: the glass container in which was stored the blood of a friend.

Last time, she had been rooted to the spot as Blackheart had manipulated her emotions, increasing her fear of him. This time, it was different.

This time, Rogue could leave her body and move—and the demon, trapped in her past, could do nothing to stop her. She could safely ignore him, and explore her memory of these events, taking in features of the room that had not fully registered with her before. She peered into shadowy alcoves and inspected the frozen flames of black candles. Some areas were blurry—she had not seen everything—but she was amazed at the level of detail that her subconscious mind had stored.

She found what—or rather, who—she was looking for behind the ornate golden throne. Sebastian Shaw, a longtime foe of the X-Men but their ally against Selene, had taken cover here. He wore a green combat suit, and squatted on his haunches. He was keeping out of sight, but there was no fear in his expression. His eyes were alert and calculating.

"We were right," said Rogue aloud, in her broad Southern drawl. "Shaw's here. I mean, he *was* here. He must have stayed behind when the others took the fight with the Black Queen upstairs. I must have caught a glimpse of him. I can't believe I didn't remember it before."

You had a lot on your mind, Rogue, said the reassuring voice of her mentor inside her head. It was through the

telepathic powers of Professor Charles Xavier that she was able to revisit her recent experiences like this.

“Ain’t that the truth!” she said ruefully, glancing back at her own body as it cowered before its attacker. It felt weird to see it from this perspective, to look into its terrified eyes and at the distinctive white stripe in its long brown hair as if they belonged to somebody else. She remembered how she had felt in that time-stopped moment of three weeks ago, and she shivered.

The Rogue of the past was dressed, like the insubstantial Rogue of the present, the costume covered her entire body but for her head-and its hood could always be pulled up too, should she have need of the additional protection.

Rogue was a mutant, part of a tiny vanguard of the next generation of humanity, born with special abilities-but she had come to see her particular power as a curse. Whenever she touched another person, skin to skin, she absorbed his or her memories and physical characteristics. It was a process over which her control had lessened with time. The bodysuit protected her from accidental contact. It also marked her out as a member of the X-Men: a team of mutants who had banded together for the common good of their kind, and of the world, and yet were perceived as outlaws by a frightened, distrustful public.

The X-Men existed to pursue the dream of Xavier, their founder: a dream of a future in which humans and mutants lived together in peace. Not everybody shared their goal, however. Some mutants believed that *homo sapiens superior* were the dominant species of Earth, destined to replace the lesser *homo sapiens*, and that they should be treated as such. Others used their powers for personal gain, caring nothing about the wider implications.

Sebastian Shaw fell into the latter camp. His greed had set into motion the chain of events that had ended here. He had bent the considerable resources of the Hellfire Club-and of his own company, Shaw Industries—into an effort to find

a cure for the deadly Legacy Virus; not for the benefit of its mostly mutant victims but for the political and financial power that would accrue to the sole possessor of such a cure. Selene's ambitions, on the other hand, had been more extreme. She had intended to use the cure to blackmail mutants into serving her. The X-Men had spent some time in a possible future in which she had already made Manhattan Island her own, and they had been determined to avert it.

Everything had come to a head in this room. The cure had existed, for a short time, in the bloodstream of one of Rogue's teammates, the mutant known as the Beast. Selene had kidnapped him and brought him here to exsanguinate him; the X-Men had halted the process just in time to save his life. As Phoenix had rushed the Beast to a hospital, and the rest of the team had engaged Selene in combat, Rogue had gone back for his blood and the precious super-cell that it contained. Blackheart had cut off her escape. She had managed to get past him, barely, but she had lost the cure in the process.

She looked at the glass container now with a wistful sigh, wishing that she could pluck it from her past self's arms, prevent it from shattering against her chest as it was destined to do. But all this was just a memory, after all: she could not change what had already happened.

"I don't understand, though," she said. "I've got the container now. There's no way Shaw could have got his hands on it before... you know. ..."

Clearly, mused Xavier, his plan was to take the cure for himself Rogue was startled to find the Professor standing beside her, wearing the same light gray suit that he had been wearing in the conference room, his brow furrowed into a frown. Xavier's physical body was confined to a hi-tech hoverchair, and Rogue still wasn't used to the fact that its limitations didn't extend to his psychic form. *But perhaps you foiled his plans when you retrieved it. It could be that he was forced to flee empty-handed, after all.*

“You think we’re barking up the wrong tree here?”

Unless we are missing something.

“We must be!” said Rogue, setting her lips into a determined pout. “Let’s try moving forward again, just a little at a time. There has to be something. ...”

The image of herself came to life in a series of slow, jerky movements, like the picture on a videotape played in slow motion. It tensed itself, preparing to spring past Blackheart, to make its ill-fated bid for freedom. She had to tear her eyes away from it. She glared at Shaw, and muttered to herself, “What are you thinking? What are you planning?”

She turned, and the answer struck her between the eyes, almost literally.

A dark red globule was hanging in the air in front of her. No, not hanging; as more time inched by, Rogue realized that the globule was moving, describing a ponderous arc. She flinched from it, expecting it to hit her until she remembered that she was not really here. She followed its sluggish progress until it splattered against the Black Queen’s throne in a silent explosion, which took several seconds to play itself out. And then she retraced its trajectory, and saw where it must have come from.

The Beast had been held in an alcove, hanging upright, attached to the wall by a mass of organic tendrils that had burrowed into his veins and begun to drain the blood from his body. Rogue had torn him free, with Phoenix’s help. But now, as more seconds passed like minutes, she saw that the tendrils were still alive, still twitching and writhing. Another droplet of blood appeared at the ragged end of a flapping tentacle, and as she watched, fascinated, it grew larger and more bulbous until it was finally shaken free.

“That’s it!” she cried in triumph. “I know how he did it.”

Professor Xavier nodded sagely, and the throne room faded around them, leaving only a black void. But this too soon dispersed, and Rogue found herself back home.

It took her a moment to readjust to her surroundings, familiar though they were. In contrast to the candlelit gloom of Selene's inner sanctum, the morning sun streamed through the windows of the venerable old mansion that was known to the outside world as the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning. Set back into its own grounds at the top end of a rarely traveled lane in the quiet Westchester town of Salem Center, the building attracted a minimum of attention. Few people suspected its true purpose.

"Our hunch was correct, then? Shaw *could* have taken the cure?" The words were spoken by the X-Men's field leader, Cyclops. His tone was grim, his expression equally so. A golden visor with a single red lens concealed his eyes, and made him seem even less approachable. Rogue knew, however, that he didn't wear it by choice. Like her, Scott Summers had little control over his mutant ability; the visor's lens was made from ruby quartz, the only material capable of keeping his devastating optic blasts in check.

At the head of the long conference table, Xavier opened his eyes and lifted his head as if waking from a light doze. "Rogue's memories do appear to confirm our suspicions," he said.

Rogue explained what she had seen. "Friend Shaw only had to wait until he was alone in that room. He could have squeezed the last drop of Hank's blood out of one of those tentacle things and made a run for it."

"Always assuming," said Doctor Henry McCoy, "that he could have improvised a refrigeration system. The super-cell could not have thrived long in an environment of room temperature." To an outsider, the cultured voice might have sounded incongruous, coming as it did from the lips of a blue-furred creature with a heavy brow, pointed ears and fangs, who wore only a pair of stretchable blue trunks. However, Hank's monstrous form was belied by his calm, analytical nature; he had been a respected scientist longer than he had been a Beast.

“There was ice on the floor,” recalled Xavier. “I saw it in Rogue’s memories.” Rogue suppressed a shiver at this reminder that she had allowed a visitor into her mind. She had known Professor X for a long time, and she trusted him, but the veiy notion of sharing her most private thoughts still freaked her out a little.

She wondered if he knew that she had been thinking of Joseph.

“Mea culpa,” said Bobby Drake, holding up a hand. “Selene sent two fire demons against us, remember? I hurled a lot of ice at them.” Bobby was a young man with mousy brown hair, clad in a formfit-ting, two-tone blue costume with red “X” logos on the shoulder and belt buckle. In combat, that costume disappeared beneath the hard, translucent shell of the incomparable Iceman. Even now, Bobby was keeping his hands occupied by condensing ice cubes out of the air and juggling absent-mindedly with them.

“It makes sense,” said Cyclops. “Too much sense for my liking.” He counted off points on his yellow-gloved fingers. “Shaw tried to find a cure for the Legacy Virus using Kree technology. We know he had a partner in that endeavor; somebody who raised a Kree island from the seabed for him. And thanks to the White Queen, we also know that, three weeks after we thought the cure lost, Shaw is working on another secret project with none other than Magneto. I think all those facts could be connected.”

“And now,” said Wolverine, “we got a pretty good idea how.” He clenched his fist, and three claws popped out of the back of his hand with a soft *snikt* sound. The claws, like his skeleton, were sheathed in adamantium, the hardest known metal. Wolverine’s yellow and dark blue costume, with extensions jutting out of his mask like long ears, combined with his restless nature to lend him the semblance of a rare breed of wild animal. He also had an animal’s enhanced senses and awareness, and an

accelerated healing factor, which allowed him to enter any combat hard and fast without undue concern for the consequences.

“Precisely,” said Xavier. “That is why I gathered you all here. The eight of you were present when the cure was supposedly destroyed. By searching your memories, I was hoping to prove that Shaw couldn’t have taken it after all. Unfortunately, there appears to be a very real possibility that he did.”

“And if he did take it,” said Rogue, “then Magneto has it now too.”

Her statement was greeted by a reflective silence. A month ago, some of the X-Men might not have been able to imagine how even their most dangerous mutant foe could do much harm with a serum designed to save lives. Since then, however, they had seen New York City enslaved. And Magneto was a far more ruthless opponent than Selene. His goal was nothing less than the total subjugation of the human race by its evolutionary successors.

Once, not such a long time ago, Rogue had met a young man called Joseph. They had come to care for each other; given more time, they could have fallen in love. The irony of it was that Joseph had been cloned from Magneto’s DNA. He had had Magneto’s personality, but he had not shared his memories of a lifetime of persecution. He did not remember the death camps and gas chambers of World War II, nor the mutant-hunting Sentinels of more recent years. He had been a good man. But unfortunately, good men sometimes die.

Wolverine finally spoke up. “Then we’ve got us a second chance,” he growled. “People are crying out for that cure, and now we know where we can find it.”

“It may not be that simple,” said Storm. Before Xavier had found her, Ororo Munroe had been worshipped as a goddess in the rainforests of her native Kenya. It was easy to see why. Apart from her mastery over the elements, she

retained a regal poise and a confident grace, and her flowing white hair—held back from her forehead by a black headband—still marked her out as something different, something exotic. Sometimes, Rogue fancied that she could see the lightning itself in Storm's eyes.

"Ororo's right," said Phoenix, brushing her long red hair off the shoulders of her combat suit. Like Xavier, Jean Grey was a telepath. But more important—and much more powerful—were her telekinetic (or TK) abilities. On occasion, Phoenix's telekinetic powers had seemed limitless, uncontrollable, and had worried even her teammates. What kept them in check was Jean's infinite compassion.

"Magneto's rule of Genosha is recognized by the United Nations," she said. "We can't just storm in there and take the cure from him by force, much as we'd like to." Cyclops, her husband, flashed her a tiny smile.

"So you say," muttered Wolverine under his breath.

"We'd be in violation of international law, Logan!" said Cyclops tersely.

"Maybe," said Nightcrawler quietly, "but how many lives might we save as a consequence?" Like Hank McCoy, Kurt Wagner's personality and appearance presented a sharp contrast. His particular mutant gene had played a cruel trick on this gentle, religious soul by making him resemble a shadowy demon out of folklore. His skin was indigo blue with a texture like velvet, his eyes a luminous yellow, and his long, prehensile tail came to a wicked barb. As if in compensation for being thus marked out, he had the power to teleport from place to place. For a time, he had found a promising niche as a circus performer—part freak, part acrobat—in his native Germany. Having ultimately been hounded out of his home, however, he had found a new one here.

"It's worth remembering," said Phoenix, "that Genosha has a Legacy epidemic. Its people are dying by the hundreds."

“Which is half the reason the UN handed the place over to Maggie,” added Iceman. “They thought it’d keep him busy and out of their hair for a while.”

“Yeah,” said Rogue, “that and the fact that he was threatening to destroy the whole world if he didn’t get his way.”

“And I said at the time it was a mistake,” grumbled Wolverine. “Magneto wants power. You give him some, he’ll come back for more every time.”

“Give him some credit, though,” persisted Phoenix. “He has the mutants’ best interests at heart, unlike the old government. I know it seems unlikely, but perhaps he only wants the Legacy cure for humanitarian reasons?”

“So, what do you think will happen when he has an army of healthy mutants under his command?” asked Wolverine. “They already look to him as some kind of savior.”

“Would you rather see those mutants die, *mein freund*?” asked Nightcrawler.

“Nevertheless,” said Cyclops, “Wolverine has a point. At the very least, I would feel much happier if we could know what Magneto’s plans are.”

“Law or no law,” said Rogue, “don’t we have a right to that cure? Shaw couldn’t have developed it without the Beast’s help. The deal was that we’d share it.”

“And Shaw welched,” said Iceman. “Big surprise!”

“Then perhaps we should take our grievance to Shaw himself,” suggested Storm, “confront him with what we have deduced.” Rogue recalled that Ororo had seemed to reach an understanding of sorts with the Black King when last they had met. She wondered if that newly forged relationship could work to the X-Men’s advantage.

“And you think he’ll just put his hands up to everything?” sneered Wolverine.

“Whatever his reaction,” said the Beast, “we have good reason to believe that Shaw is engaged in nefarious activities of some description. Our evidence of Magneto’s

involvement is circumstantial at best. Our most logical course is to question Shaw in the first instance.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” said Wolverine, “Frost and Hellstrom already tried that.”

“Magneto is the greater threat here,” said Nightcrawler. “We can’t just ignore him.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Xavier, his considered words bringing the discussion to a halt. He held his fingers together in front of his lips, and his eyes were hooded. He always seemed like this when Magneto was mentioned: subdued, as if he had resigned himself to fighting this battle over and over again for the rest of his days.

“According to our information,” the Professor continued, “Shaw is planning a worldwide Hellfire Club party on the night of the solstice—tomorrow night. I think it’s reasonable to assume that his plans, whatever they are, will reach fruition then.”

“Which doesn’t leave us much time,” said Phoenix.

“Quite. I think we need two teams: one to confront Shaw in the hope that this can be ended quickly, and the other to investigate the situation in Genosha—in case it can’t.”

“Rogue has been to Genosha more recently than any of us,” offered Cyclops.

Rogue nodded, thinking about Joseph again. He had sacrificed his life to save the world that Magneto had imperiled—but when she had flown to Genosha alone in search of its new ruler, it had not been for revenge. She had hoped to find Joseph again, buried somewhere in the heart of his corrupted template. She had hoped to redeem a tortured soul. Perhaps she had been naive, but she had wanted to believe that such a thing was possible. After all, she had found redemption with the X-Men herself: Xavier had accepted her into his team, his family, despite her past misdemeanors.

“The place is a mess,” she reported. “Everything the Genoshans built with mutate slave labor has been torn apart

—and thanks to the Legacy epidemic, they’ve hardly started to put the pieces back together. As Wolvie said, the mutants have welcomed the new order with open arms, but the baseline humans can’t get away from the island fast enough—those who haven’t decided to stay and slug it out, that is. The war might be over according to Magneto, but some of his ‘loyal subjects’ haven’t realized it yet.”

“Could you lead a team of four into the country undetected?” asked Xavier.

“Shouldn’t be a problem. I flew right in there a month or so back without anyone noticing.”

“Magneto might have beefed up his security since then,” Wolverine pointed out.

“There’s no way of knowing,” said Cyclops, “not with news from inside the country as scarce as it is.”

“Be careful,” advised Xavier sternly. “I would rather not spark an international incident if we can help it. Your task for the present is simply to reconnoiter.”

“Understood,” said Rogue.

“Take Wolverine, Nightcrawler and Iceman with you,” said Cyclops. “Storm and the Beast have had the most contact with Shaw recently, so they’ll accompany Phoenix and me to the Hellfire Club in Hong Kong.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” said Rogue with forced levity, trying to ignore the fact that her heart was heavy at the thought of this mission.

She had to forget the past, she knew that. She had to deal with Magneto as he was now, as she had always known him: as an implacable foe. She had to accept what she had discovered when she had confronted him at last, when she had stolen his soul and looked into his innermost being.

She had to forget the man that he could have been—because that man was long since dead.

CHAPTER 3

^NCE, HAMMER Bay had been lauded for its dynamic, forward-thinking architecture. The Genoshan government had had the old buildings tom down and replaced by the latest designs, their angles rounded and their lines softened. The skyline had been a wondrous sight, majestic, almost natural. The insides of its buildings, like the streets, had been clean and welcoming, fitted with every modern convenience. Everything had been built to a plan, each structure complementing those around it perfectly. No compromises had been made, no corners cut for the sake of expediency or cost. Government officials had received award after award, taking the podium at a string of international events with modest smiles and enterprising words that everybody wanted to hear.

A few people had wondered how Genosha had become so prosperous, how it had achieved so much in so short a time. Some had even suspected that the country had hidden resources. But nobody had asked too many questions. Not until it was too late.

Now, Hammer Bay's award-winning buildings were broken. Some had been gutted or felled, and there were noticeable gaps in the meticulously sculpted skyline. From Wolverine's vantage point, a few miles off-shore, the city resembled a mined castle. Lights still shone from its windows, but they were relatively few now. Smoke billowed from more than one street, and the night sky was washed in angry shades of red.

He sniffed the air, scowling at the acrid smell of burning. It was faint-so faint that he wondered if the others, without the benefit of his enhanced senses, could detect it. They certainly couldn't have caught the scent of the man who was flying out of the city toward them under his own power-

although they might have seen him by now, a black shape growing and detaching itself from the darkness.

“Incoming,” he muttered.

Iceman’s knuckles tightened on the side of the small powered boat as the figure reached them. He was wearing a green uniform festooned with holsters and ammunition belts, but the top of a yellow skinsuit was still visible around his neck. His face was concealed by a dark blue gas mask into which was set a filtered speaking grille and a reflective eyepiece. A green cap was pulled down over this.

“Never thought I’d see a mutate in magistrates’ clothing,” grumbled Wolverine.

The mutate’s size and demeanor betrayed the fact that he was a boy, no more than fourteen or fifteen years old—but Wolverine knew better than to underestimate him. Not only did he carry a rifle, but there was no telling what other powers he might possess.

The boy hovered about ten feet above the boat, glaring at each of its occupants in turn. “You have invaded Genoshan territorial waters.” He was trying to sound menacing, but his voice hadn’t broken yet. “Turn back now or suffer the consequences!”

Nightcrawler responded with a stream of his native German, of which Wolverine only understood the occasional word. A natural actor, Kurt played the part of the bewildered tourist well. Of course, his appearance would have given the game away had it not been for his image inducer. The device cast a holographic field around him, which made him look like a tall, wiry man with a pencil-thin moustache. The rest of the X-Men didn’t need such aids to hide their mutant natures, although they had eschewed their usual colorful costumes for less conspicuous attire. Wolverine wore a light khaki shirt and shorts to keep him cool in the heat of the near-equatorial day. He had also donned a sombrero hat, which he tipped back to regard the mutate with a quizzically raised eyebrow.

Rogue joined in the protestations of innocence. "Come on sugar, can't you give us a break? We're just trying to take in some of the sights here." Even in this climate, she had wrapped herself in a red, hooded jogger top for safety.

"A five-mile exclusion zone is in force around our island."

"Well, we didn't know that," complained Iceman.

"I do not believe your story," said the mutate boy. "We have turned away many journalists from our shores. We will not be spied upon."

Rogue glanced at Wolverine, then looked back at the mutate with a wry grin. "OK, sugar, you caught us. We just wanted to get a bit of

footage for the evening news, you know? But if you feel so strongly about it, we'll just mosey on back to where we came from."

The mutate gave her a curt nod, then folded his arms and remained in his hovering position. Evidently, he was waiting for her to carry out her promise.

Reluctantly, Rogue gunned the outboard engine and steered the boat around until it was pointing in the direction of Madagascar, from which it had been hired. As it cut a white trail across the calm surface of the Indian Ocean, the mutate watched it go, a silent sentry. It wasn't until Hammer Bay was little more than a dot on the horizon that Wolverine, with his sharp eyes, saw the boy turn and fly back to his concealed guard post at last.

Rogue killed the motor again, and let the boat drift. "Looks like you were right," she sighed. "Magneto's closed his borders. This is going to be trickier than I'd hoped."

"He can't have mutates watching the entire coastline, surely?" said Iceman.

"Probably not," said Wolverine, "and from what I've heard, he's as keen to keep Genosha's non-mutant population in as he is to keep the rest of the world out. His troops have got to be over-stretched!"

“Nevertheless,” said Nightcrawler, “that leaves us with a problem. How do we find the weak points in his surveillance from five miles away?”

“I have an idea,” said Rogue, “but I’m not sure any of us are going to like it.”

They took the boat in a wide arc around the distant lights of the city before silencing the engine again and breaking out the oars. They approached the island as quietly as they could; Nightcrawler scanned it through binoculars and guided them toward what looked like a secluded nook. He was alert for any sign of movement, any indication that they had been sighted again.

The X-Men’s plane—a Lockheed Blackbird souped up with alien technology—had brought them to East Africa in record-shattering time, but Kurt felt as if it had already been a long day. The time difference was probably to blame. Genosha was nine hours ahead of New York: his body thought it was mid-afternoon, but his senses insisted that it was midnight.

In this part of the world, he thought with a chill, it was the twenty-first of December already. Further east, the sun was on the verge of dawning. The Hellfire Club’s solstice celebrations would be underway in as little as fourteen hours.

Wolverine stopped rowing. “I think this is as close as we can safely get,” he said.

“See anywhere we can use?” asked Rogue.

Nightcrawler squinted through the binoculars, trying to make out shapes in the darkness. Fortunately, his night vision was excellent. “I’m looking at a cliff face with a small copse on top,” he reported. “It’s just a few miles from Hammer Bay—and I can’t see any guards.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Rogue.

“So long as you don’t go ‘porting into a tree,” cautioned Wolverine.

Nightcrawler nodded grimly. For him, this was the most dangerous part of Rogue’s plan. Such a long-distance

teleport would be a strain, but it was perfectly feasible; what worried him was that, without a precise idea of the layout of his destination, he could easily materialize inside something else. In that case, he would suffer a quick but agonizing death.

He fixed his sights upon a particular spot at the top of the distant cliff edge. He tried to visualize it from all angles, to reconstruct the site inside his head. It would have been better to appear further into the trees, but it would also have been much riskier. This way, he would be visible to any onlookers for a second before he could take cover. Reaching through his illusory light-colored suit and into a pouch in his red fighting tunic, Nightcrawler thumbed off the image inducer and revealed his true form. Another side-effect of his mutant gene was that he became almost invisible when cast into shadow; it was just the advantage he needed.

“Good luck,” said Iceman, crossing the fingers of both hands.

Nightcrawler took a deep breath, concentrated on the place in his mind and envisaged himself there. His ears were momentarily deadened by a pop of imploding air, and his nostrils assailed by the stench of brimstone that always accompanied his teleports: another cruel irony. He sprinted through a cloud of dark smoke and into the trees; he didn’t even give himself time to feel relieved that he had reached Genosha in one piece.

Picking out a tree with particularly dense foliage, Nightcrawler took a prodigious leap onto its trunk and scuttled into its uppermost branches, narrowing his headlamp eyes lest they betray his presence. He prayed that such precautions would prove unnecessary-but to his dismay, he soon heard footsteps approaching.

A mutate passed beneath him, the top of his head just a few feet below Nightcrawler’s perch. He looked scrawny and malnourished, his green uniform hanging off him like rags from a scarecrow: he was probably ill with Legacy. His lips

were pinched and his expression haunted. He moved slowly, uncertainly. Perhaps he only *suspected* that he had heard or seen something. . . .

But as he passed Nightcrawler's hiding place, the mutate faltered and sniffed the air. He cocked his head to one side suspiciously, and Kurt realized that, like Wolverine, he had the ability to detect another person's scent.

Inwardly cursing his luck, he sprang from his hiding place and somersaulted to land feet-first on his would-be hunter's neck. Fortunately, as his appearance had suggested, the mutate had not been blessed with great physical defenses. He emitted a tiny, high-pitched groan and collapsed into the undergrowth. Nightcrawler stooped beside him and checked his pulse. He was alive, but he would be out for a while at least.

Time was of the essence now. The mutate had a belt-mounted radio handset, and it couldn't be too long before he was expected to report in. Nightcrawler listened for a moment, but heard nothing to suggest that there were more sentries about. Moving quickly but lightly on his feet, darting from tree to tree, he made his way back to the cliff edge.

With the moon behind him and the lights of Hammer Bay some way down the coast to his left, he couldn't see the X-Men's boat on the sea—but he knew it was out there. He teleported again, more confidently this time, aiming for a point some four feet above the one from which he had started out. As he had expected, he materialized above cold, dark water: the boat had been anchored, but it had still drifted a short way on its chain since he had left it. Before gravity could take hold of him, he got a fix on its new position and vanished again to reappear neatly beside his teammates.

"One guard," he reported. "I was forced to deal with him."

"Did he get a look at you?" asked Wolverine. Nightcrawler shook his head.

“Either way,” said Rogue, “the sooner we get back over there, the better.” She removed a long black glove, and gave Nightcrawler an apologetic look. “You ready for this, sugar?”

“When you are,” he replied, trying to sound cheerful.

As bad as this would be for him, he knew it would be far, far worse for her.

Rogue reached out and brushed her fingers across Nightcrawler’s cheek; just a brief, gentle caress, but the result of it hit her like a sledgehammer between the eyes. Everything that Kurt Wagner was, everything he thought and felt, was rushing into her, trying to displace her own identity. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on her sense of self. She tried not to focus upon the stray thoughts, the odd recollections, that were sluicing through her brain to light up the insides of her eyelids. She remembered how unsettling it had been to let the Professor into her mind, and she wondered if Kurt was feeling the same about her now.

The onslaught subsided, and she was aware of her own lungs heaving. She looked down at her uncovered hand and saw that the skin was dark blue.

Nightcrawler was holding his head in his hands-but after a moment, he looked up and grinned at her bravely. He was resilient. He had been through this-and, like all of them, much worse—before. He would recover, faster than most of Rogue’s victims did.

There was an image in her mind: a small patch of land surrounded by trees, in which a uniformed mutate lay face down. Instinctively, she knew how to get to that place. She replaced her glove, put her arm around Wolverine’s shoulders and drew him to her side.

Alone, Nightcrawler wouldn’t have been able to take all three of his colleagues to Genosha. He found it a strain to teleport with even one passenger, especially over such a distance. To do so three times in succession would have killed him. This way, Rogue could take some of that burden

from him. She could teleport herself and Wolverine to the island now, before her stolen powers began to fade. In a few minutes' time, Nightcrawler would be healthy again, and he could follow with Iceman.

But Kurt had warned her, in no uncertain terms, that it would hurt.

Rogue closed her eyes and teleported. The world exploded around her, and she was enveloped in dark smoke, feeling as if a giant hand had seized her internal organs and twisted them forty-five degrees clockwise. She let out a scream, feeling shamed by Wolverine's stoic refusal to do likewise: he must have been feeling almost as bad as she did.

Thankfully, it was over in a second. The sweet smell of pollen hit Rogue's nostrils, overwhelmed an instant later by that of brimstone, and she saw the felled mutate at her feet. She hadn't even had time, she realized giddily, to wonder what might have happened if he had woken up and begun to wander about. She was only vaguely aware of Wolverine beside her; she didn't know what condition he was in.

Her legs felt like jelly, and she collapsed against a tree, breathing heavily, her stomach heaving.

"Remind me," she panted, "to never, ever do that again."
Iceman felt sick.

He sat hunched up with his back against a tree-trunk and his arms around his knees, putting all his efforts into regulating his own body temperature and waiting for the nausea to pass.

It was all right for the others, he thought: Nightcrawler was used to this, Wolverine had his healing factor and Rogue was damn near invulnerable. They had all coped better than he had with the stresses that the teleport had placed on their bodies. They were standing around the unconscious mutate now, discussing what was to be done with him.

"Whatever you say, Logan," insisted Nightcrawler, "I will not agree that it's acceptable to take a human life."

"This guy knew what he was getting into when he took the job!" growled Wolverine.

"And who's to say he had a choice in the matter, *mein freund*?"

"We have to do something," said Rogue. "We can't afford to have our presence here discovered." Her skin hadn't quite returned to its normal color yet; it still had a blue tint.

"Nothing else we *can* do," said Wolverine. "As soon as our mutate friend wakes up, he'll put a call in to his boss. Best we toss him into the sea now and nip the problem in the bud."

Nightcrawler shook his head vehemently. "All he can report is that somebody attacked him from behind. He didn't see me."

"But," said Rogue, mulling at her chin thoughtfully, "when Magneto hears the report of that other sentry, he might just put two and two together and make X."

"Who's to say he won't do that anyway, if one of his guards goes missing?"

"At least we'll have bought ourselves some time," said Wolverine.

"You know what Cyclops would say if he was here," said Rogue.

"But he ain't here, is he!"

It was a familiar argument, and one that Wolverine must have known he would lose. But he had his say nonetheless. He believed that, as the X-Men's foes grew deadlier and more ruthless, so too did they have to change their methods. He believed that a war could not be won without sacrifices. Iceman tended to steer clear of such disputes; in theory, he agreed with Nightcrawler's principled stance, but he could see Wolverine's point as well. Leaving the mutate alive was asking for trouble. It meant that, somewhere down the line, the X-Men's lives could be endangered, their vital

mission jeopardized. Disposing of their foe-a man who would surely have done the same to them without hesitation-was the easier option. And life was difficult enough as it was for a mutant; for an X-Man, even more so.

Iceman would have shed few tears if Wolverine had killed the mutate. But he could never have delivered the fatal blow himself.

"It's your call, darling!" said Wolverine, looking at Rogue.

"We'll tie him up," she said decisively, "and hide him somewhere."

Wolverine shook his head. "No point. If we're not gonna do the job properly, best leave him as he is. We don't to make this look too professional." The mutate groaned as he began to stir, and Wolverine dropped to his haunches beside him. He slipped his hands around the man's throat and applied pressure to his sensitive nerve clusters until he passed out again. "There-should keep him under for another couple of hours. Pile a few leaves on top of him. With luck, we'll be long gone before the alarm's raised."

Rogue nodded her approval to this course of action, and turned to Iceman. He sighed and climbed to his feet, nodding to signal that he was well enough to proceed. In fact, he was still feeling queasy, but he would just have to put up with that.

"So, which way to Hammer Bay?" he asked.

The question had been directed at Nightcrawler, but it was Wolverine who answered by setting off sure-footedly through the trees. The others followed him without question: they knew that his sense of direction was unparalleled.

Emerging from the copse, they hurried down a gentle slope into a moonlit field. As Wolverine led the way across it quickly, eager to reach the cover of more trees on the far side, Iceman looked at the dead earth beneath his feet. He could sense that it had not felt water in a long time; whatever seeds had been planted in it had been neglected, left to wither in the hot, dry climate. Genosha had once

advertised itself as “a green and pleasant land,” and the claim had not been an exaggeration. The field, he supposed, was symbolic of the state to which the human-mutate war had reduced a once proud country.

He couldn't help but wonder if America might one day suffer a similar fate. His instinct was to deny that such a horror was even possible-but what if an all-out war began there too? Who could predict how that might end?

The others had almost crossed the field, and Iceman made to catch up with them-but he frowned as he caught sight of something. Something odd about one of the trees in front of them—but what was it? Had it moved? If he concentrated and looked at a certain spot in a certain way, then part of the landscape seemed off-kilter somehow, distorted. He ought to have warned the others, but none of them appeared to have noticed anything amiss, and that made Bobby doubt the evidence of his own eyes.

The air rippled like a heat haze, just a few feet in front of Nightcrawler and to his left, and suddenly he was sure. “Guys,” he said, “I think there's something up there!”

A shape formed out of nowhere. It was a woman, her hands clasped to her cheeks, her eyes and mouth stretched into wide saucer shapes. She was insubstantial like a ghost, and Iceman could see the trees through her. She must have blended herself into her background, masking her presence somehow even from Wolverine's senses.

She was screaming, and her voice was a shrill alarm signal. Wolverine leapt at her, his claws springing from their housings, but she dissipated on the air and left him to slice through green mist. The scream sounded as if it were coming from all around the X-Men now, boring into their skulls and filling their brains with its intensity. Iceman put his hands over his ears, but it didn't keep the scream out. Rogue threw an experimental punch, looking aggrieved but not at all surprised when she connected with nothing. She

tried again anyway, and Iceman saw a faint green shimmer as something recoiled from her fist.

Quickly, he brought up his hands and condensed the moisture in the air around it. A large, jagged lump of ice thudded into the ground between the four X-Men, and Iceman was gratified to see that he had trapped a green blur in its depths. The screaming had stopped.

"Good work, Bobby," said Rogue. Iceman's ears were still numb, and the words sounded distant to him. "Now let's get out of here before someone comes to investigate that racket!"

"Too late," said Wolverine grimly.

Wolverine's keen ears had detected a familiar whining sound. Aircars, four or more of them, running on their quiet antigravity-powered engines. They had once been used by Genosha's so-called peace-keepers, its human magistrates, but he had no doubt that they would have fallen into the hands of Magneto's followers.

The others could hear them too now, and they followed him into the woods at a run. Bright searchlights stabbed through the trees and lit up the undergrowth, and Wolverine caught flashes of rounded silver panels through the leaves above him. A finger of light caught Rogue momentarily, followed by a barrage of blaster fire that ripped up the ground beneath the X-Men's feet. Nightcrawler was buffeted by an explosion, but he teleported instinctively before he could take shrapnel damage.

"So much for sneaking into the country undetected," he said ruefully.

"Looks like it's Plan B, people," said Rogue.

They all knew what she meant. They had discussed this on the boat ride from Madagascar. Now that their presence in Genosha had been discovered, they would be hunted down-and Magneto's forces outnumbered them by hundreds to one. If they stayed together, they could only fall together. Individually, however, each of them stood a chance of being

able to keep out of sight-and they only needed one of them to complete the mission, to find evidence of their enemy's plans and to get that information out to the rest of their team.

The X-Men scattered, and even Wolverine had soon lost sight of his three teammates through the foliage. He could hear a commotion above him, though: Rogue had flown straight up into the sky and made herself a target for the aircars, distracting their pilots. Plucky lady.

And there was something else: a whooshing of air behind him. A flying mutate, and a fast one. He varied his path, putting cover between himself and his pursuer, but it was no use. The mutate kept gaining on him until Wolverine knew that he had to stand and fight.

A muscular figure flew at him like a cannonball. Wolverine stood his ground until the last possible moment, then leapt beneath his incoming attacker. But the mutate's speed was incredible, and he was still able to clip the X-Man's chin with a fist that felt like an anvil. It was only a glancing blow, but it was enough to rattle even Wolverine's reinforced bones.

He was still reeling when the mutate came in for a second pass. This time, he threw himself backwards and brought up his hands and feet, taking hold of the mutate's shoulders and simultaneously delivering a punishing double-kick to his stomach. His foe spun around in midair and hit the ground hard. He was already back on his feet by the time the X-Man could press his advantage-but Logan was fast too. The pair closed in hand-to-hand combat, and the mutate, for all his speed and strength, couldn't land a solid blow on his twisting, slippery opponent. Wolverine, on the other hand, made himself an opening and raked his claws across the mutate's arm. He felt them tearing through skin, felt a warm trickle against his knuckles, and grinned to himself through clenched teeth. "First blood," he snarled in triumph.

And then he caught another two scents. Three. Four. More mutants, alerted by the sounds of combat or perhaps by an inaudible distress signal. They were approaching from all sides, homing unerringly upon the X-Man's position. Fuelled now by urgency, he laid into his opponent, giving no quarter, and felled him with two swift adamantium-laced punches to the jaw. But his senses told him that it was already too late.

He was surrounded.

Nightcrawler was making slow but sure progress, leaping from treetop to treetop, a shifting shadow, melting into the darkness whenever he thought there might be eyes upon him. He was leaving the sounds of the aircars behind him, their engines protesting as they tried to keep up with their target. He feared for Rogue's life-but at least, he thought, while the aircars were still spitting fire, it meant that she was giving them something to aim at.

And then, he heard a new sound: the sound of a pitched battle from somewhere ahead of him and over to the right. The clanging of metal against metal, the shrieking of unfamiliar energy discharges. It had to mean that Wolverine or Iceman was in trouble.

Kurt hesitated. He longed to help with every fiber of his being, but the X-Men's plan forbade it. He was supposed to keep away from the others. It sounded very much like his teammate was outnumbered: if he went blundering in, then he was likely to get himself captured or killed too. But how could he abandon a friend in need?

Even before he had formed an answer to that question, he found himself heading toward the source of the disturbance. What harm could it do to take a quick look at least, to see precisely what the situation was? He could always teleport away if he had to.

And so it was that Nightcrawler found Wolverine, fighting savagely to keep himself from being overwhelmed by five green-clad mutants. The X-Man's khaki shirt was torn and

his cheek bloodied. His claws lashed out this way and that, faster than Nightcrawler could follow, his eyes were wild and the only sounds to emerge from his throat were a series of guttural growls and grunts. Nightcrawler mumbled a quick prayer. Logan was his best friend-but when he surrendered all reason, when he gave in to his animal side like this, he scared even Kurt.

Ironically, though, it was when Wolverine lost control—when he allowed his finely-honed instincts to take over and guide him—that he was at his most effective in battle. Even the disapproving Nightcrawler had to admit that he was putting on an impressive display: the mutants couldn't lay a hand on him, and every time they tried, they received new cuts for their troubles. Even as Kurt hesitated, as he tried to decide if he should intervene or not, one of the mutants let out a gargling scream, clutched his hands to his stomach and keeled over. An instant later, a woman with fire for her hair was felled by a roundhouse punch. A younger man leapt upon his foe with an angry roar—he was wearing no mask, and Kurt could see that his skin was a deep jet in color, glistening like crystal—but his own momentum was turned against him. Thrown clear of the melee, he hurtled into a tree-trunk, and Nightcrawler thought he heard a sound like glass breaking.

Wolverine was left with only two opponents now, but even his luck couldn't hold out forever. He was tagged from behind by a young female mutate with long talons in place of fingers. Nightcrawler winced in sympathy as her nails slashed into his side, between his ribs, and Logan arched his back in pain. A broadshouldered man whose steel body had burst out of his combat suit seized his opportunity; he stepped forward and took hold of Wolverine's head in his metal hands. When he failed to crush his enemy's skull, he looked confused and irritated, and he increased the pressure. The adamantium in Wolverine's bones was keeping him alive, but for how much longer? His expression

was strained, his knees beginning to buckle. And the girl with the talons was moving in to strike again.

By the time she got close, Nightcrawler was sitting on the shoulders of the steel man, jamming his cap down over his eyes. He didn't have the strength to break the mutate's grip on Wolverine, but the distraction of his sudden, noisy appearance—and his cheerful cry of “Peek-a-boo !”—was enough to do the job. The mutate threw his hands up to his head, but Nightcrawler had already teleported away again.

In the meantime, Wolverine and the girl were fighting claw to talon-and Nightcrawler was alarmed to see that his teammate was losing. It wasn't that the girl was good-far from it, she seemed undisciplined and inexperienced, her fighting style amounting to little more than flailing at her foe and hoping for the best-but Wolverine was uncharacteristically slow, even clumsy. He favored his injured side, and Kurt realized that the wound was deeper than he had thought. It was bleeding. Logan needed a breather; time for his healing factor to kick in.

The steel man bore down upon Nightcrawler like a runaway train, his roar like a warning siren. It was easy enough to avoid him with a standing somersault and a handspring off the mutate's shoulder. But bringing him down would be another matter—and the flameheaded woman was already beginning to stir again.

“In this case,” he muttered to himself, “I think discretion is very definitely the better part of valor.” A space opened up between Wolverine and his opponent, and Nightcrawler teleported into it. He took advantage of the girl's bemusement to land a punch to her head, followed up by a kick to the stomach that sent her sprawling away from him. “Pardon my feet, madam,” he said apologetically. Then he took hold of Wolverine and added, in a graver tone: “And pardon me for doing this to you a second time in one day, *mein freund*.”

Wolverine didn't say anything. He fell into Nightcrawler's arms like a dead weight. Fortunately, this tandem 'port was much shorter than the last-nor did it have to be undertaken blindly. Nevertheless, Kurt gritted his teeth and steeled himself as he visualized the open field through which he had recently passed.

Even as three mutates rushed them from opposite sides, Nightcrawler and Wolverine vanished in a puff of smoke.

Rogue had kept the aircars occupied for as long as she could-she had certainly given her teammates a valuable head start-but a few near misses had convinced her that it was time to think about herself now. She dropped back below the treetops and flew a random pattern around the trunks, hoping to shake off her pursuers. It was no use, though. She couldn't reach her top speed, not without sacrificing maneuverability—even now, her gloved hands were raised to keep branches from whipping across her face—and no matter where she flew, the probing searchlights from above still found her. She suspected that the aircars' onboard computers had locked on to her genetic pattern, that there was no escape for her now.

Suddenly, she ran out of cover. She shot past the last of the trees, out into the open, and the aircars swooped in behind her again, preventing her from turning back. Of the original four, only two had remained doggedly with her-but each held two uniformed mutates. And now that they could see her, they were using their vehicles' blaster weapons again.

Rogue twisted and turned, making herself as difficult to hit as possible-but the very air around her was erupting in flames, and she was buffeted fiercely. Through a haze of smoke, she saw the lights of Hammer Bay ahead of her, and she wondered if she might find shelter among its buildings. But the capital was still too far away, and she was too exposed.

She changed tactics, flipping herself over and rocketing toward the foremost aircar, her fists outstretched in front of her. She wished she could see the expressions of its masked occupants, but their body language at least suggested that she was unnerving them. She had also given them the opportunity to take one point-blank shot.

She closed her eyes and grimaced as the fiery pain washed over her. It was almost unbearable, even to her. Her heavy clothing burst into flame, but she was determined to keep going. She heard a mutate cry out in alarm as she smacked into a warm body. She was in the aircar now, fighting blindly, lashing out at anything that touched her, feeling the crack of bones beneath her knuckles.

By the time her teary eyes had cleared, she was the only person left standing. She felt dizzy, and her jogger top was charred and halfmelted. An unconscious mutate lay at her feet; she must have knocked the other one overboard. The aircar was out of control, losing height as it screamed toward Hammer Bay. Fortunately, she had flown one of these things before.

Pulling back heavily on the joystick, Rogue wrestled the vehicle's nose up; its undercarriage almost scraped the ground, but it began to climb again. She ducked as blaster fire sizzled past her ears. The second aircar was on her tail. Smiling maliciously to herself, she turned her vehicle around and set it on a head-to-head collision course with its pursuer.

The mutates in the second car tried to swerve around and below her, but Rogue threw her car into a steep right bank and effectively dive-bombed them. They leapt out of their cockpit an instant before the unavoidable impact, as did she. She flew as hard and as fast as she could, but she didn't get very far before she was rocked by the explosion of two engines.

Winded by the blast, disoriented and hurting, it was all Rogue could do to keep moving, to put as much distance

between herself and her hunters-whether they were alive or dead-as she could before she passed out. She didn't even know which direction she had taken, how high she was, how far she flown already. All she was aware of was the pain in her body, and the blackness that was encroaching ever further upon her vision and then, after what seemed like a lamentably short time, the realization that she couldn't control her muscles any more and the sensation of falling... falling.. . .

Rogue hit the ground in an untended field about a mile outside Hammer Bay. The earth itself shook with the impact. And there she lay, unmoving, in a crater of her own making. Until somebody found her.

CHAPTEI4

THE HELLFIRE Club's New South Wales branch stood on the southern shore of Sydney Harbor. The building, of necessity, was

_conspicuously more modern than the organization usually

'avored. However, it was well situated in one of Australia's most wealthy areas, and the famous Harbor Bridge bisected the view from the front windows of its main ballroom.

Behind those windows now, a fight was nearing its conclusion. The Hellfire Club had thrown almost thirty of its best mercenary agents, dressed in blue and red uniforms with dehumanizing blank flesh-toned masks, at just four intruders. They were losing.

Skilled and highly trained as they were-not to mention armed with lightweight machine-guns-the agents were no match for their genetically gifted foes. The Beast had the strength of several men, and his agility kept him three steps ahead of them; Phoenix snatched their weapons from them with telekinesis while Storm's control over the winds kept them off-balance; and Cyclops's optic blasts could fell two or three agents at a time.

This wasn't going at all how the X-Men had planned it.

Cyclops had hoped, in the first instance at least, to be able to talk to the man who had no doubt approved the order to attack. After dropping off their teammates in Madagascar, he, Phoenix, Storm and the Beast had taken the Blackbird on to Hong Kong, only to find that Sebastian Shaw was not in residence at the Hellfire Club's headquarters there. An interminable wait had followed before some desk clerk, grumpy from being roused in the early hours of the morning, had finally informed them that they would have to travel even further east. It made sense, Scott supposed; Shaw had told Emma Frost that the solstice celebrations would begin in Sydney. It was just like him to want to be there.

They had reached their destination shortly after eight, local time. The morning sun had already been hot, and Cyclops had been glad of the cool air currents along the waterfront. His body had insisted that it was still five o'clock the previous evening.

They had been greeted by Shaw's assistant, Tessa, which in itself had all but confirmed that the Black King was indeed here. She had informed them, in a brusque tone, that her employer had had a late night, that he was sleeping and that they should come back later. Mindful of his encroaching deadline, Cyclops had been just as insistent in return. Tessa had refused to discuss the matter further, slamming the door in his face—but he had shot out its lock with an optic blast and followed her into the building.

That was when the fight had begun.

It ended now with three sharp retorts. The figure of Sebastian Shaw was framed by one of the ballroom's arched doorways. He was dressed in a black silk dressing gown, a golden dragon pattern running down one side. His black hair was ruffled, not yet tied into its usual ponytail, and his expression was an approaching thunderstorm. Tessa had adopted her customary position at his shoulder. The

clapping of Shaw's hands had been a signal to his costumed pawns. They ceased their attack and withdrew quickly, carrying their fallen with them. Their heads were bowed as if they had been shamed in the sight of their leader.

"Did my assistant not make it clear," he said in a voice that dripped ice, "that I do not wish to receive visitors this morning?"

The X-Men lined up to face him, Cyclops bristling at Shaw's easy air of superiority. He was about to issue a rejoinder when Storm spoke quietly: "We apologize for the intrusion, Sebastian, but our business here will not wait."

Shaw sneered at her. "Do not presume upon the understanding that we once shared, woman. We could have been allies. We are not. That makes us enemies, now and forever."

Storm withdrew as if stung. Even Cyclops hadn't expected Shaw to be quite this irritable. Normally, he was inscrutable, his thoughts and feelings hidden beneath a cultured veneer. *Perhaps he just doesn't do mornings*, Phoenix's telepathic voice quipped inside his mind.

"If friendship does not influence you," said the Beast, "then how about the plain, old-fashioned concept of a gentleman's honor? You and I had a deal, Shaw. You could not have developed the Legacy cure without my experience in the field, just as I was reliant on your resources. We agreed to share it."

"An agreement made under duress, and one that you are powerless to enforce."

"We know you have the cure, Shaw," said Cyclops, "and we're prepared to take this building apart brick by brick until we find it." "It would do you no good. It is not here."

"You admit, then, that you took it," said Storm pointedly.

Shaw shrugged. "I see no need to play word games with you. Yes, I have the cure. I took it from Selene's throne room while you were otherwise engaged. And as you no doubt know, I have great plans for it: plans that involve a certain

business acquaintance of mine.” “Magneto,” said Cyclops, tight-lipped.

“Indeed. Beyond that, I am not prepared to discuss the matter.” “What about this fireworks display of yours?” asked Phoenix.

“I have already been quizzed about this evening’s festivities by your associates, Frost and Hellstrom. I have no more to say. Now, if you will excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, I have another busy day ahead of me.” Shaw smiled and bowed courteously to his visitors, but his contempt for them showed in his eyes.

Cyclops clenched his fists. “You don’t expect us to let you walk out of here, do you?”

Shaw straightened. “And how do you intend to stop me, Mr. Summers?” His tone had softened; now, he sounded genuinely amused. He crooked the fingers of one hand, challenging the X-Men’s leader to approach him. “Feel free to attack me if you must. Pit your mutant powers against mine. Beat me to within an inch of my life if you can. You will learn no more than I have already told you.”

“There are other ways of gaining information, Shaw,” said Phoenix. The Black King raised an eyebrow. “Ah, the X-Men’s resident telepath. Yes, Miss Grey, I have no doubt that you could tear my secrets from me if you so wished. I also expect that you would cause me much pain in the process, should I choose to resist—which, of course, I would.” He spread his arms wide in a gesture of helplessness. “So, the decision is yours. Will you do what your White Queen would not? Will you violate me?”

Cyclops and Phoenix exchanged a glance. They could have communed in secret through the permanent telepathic link that, as husband and wife, they shared—but there was no need. They knew each other well enough for each to know what the other was thinking.

Phoenix had always known how easy it would be to abuse her powers. When Shaw had talked of violation, he

had chosen his words carefully, reminding her that she had pledged never to invade another person's privacy, never to force her way into somebody else's thoughts without good reason. Cyclops admired her restraint. He was a firm believer in the philosophy that a hero was only as pure as his or her methods. But he was also a pragmatist. He knew that, sometimes, when the stakes were high enough, compromises had to be made.

"Do it," he said.

Closing her eyes, Phoenix tuned out the distractions of the physical world. She trusted in her husband and her teammates implicitly. She knew that if it came to it, if Shaw or more of his lackeys attacked her physical body, then she had the best possible protection.

The psychic plane was incomprehensible to human senses, but Jean Grey's mind could translate it into images that she understood. She was standing in a white void, the only feature of which was a long, tall wall built from red bricks. She could not see its top, nor its end in either direction. The wall represented Sebastian Shaw's mental defenses. For a non-telepath, it was impressive-but Phoenix could see the cracks in the brickwork, the crumbling mortar, that would allow her to force her way through it.

"I will not allow you to do this."

The voice did not surprise her. She did not even have to turn to see who had spoken. "Unfortunately," she sighed, "I must—and you cannot stop me. It would be better for all concerned if you talked to your employer, persuaded him to give his information freely." "Sebastian will not pander to such as you, X-Man."

"Your Black King is a ruthless man, his partner even more so. We cannot ignore the fact that they have gained this advantage. If they intend to misuse the Legacy cure, then we have no option but to oppose them-and we will defeat them, Tessa."

"Then you will have to go through me first."

Phoenix faced her opponent at last. In the ballroom, Tessa had been dressed demurely in a neat black jacket, short skirt and high heels. Here, she wore the leather teddy, knee-length boots and cloak of a Black Queen, and she appeared to have increased in stature twofold. Phoenix wasn't impressed. Here, both she and Tessa could look like anything they wanted to; it was no real test of their abilities. Jean chose to present her true form: it was not worth the waste of energy to cloak herself in a lie.

She let Tessa make the first strike. Black tendrils burst out of the white ground at her feet: dead and rotting plant matter, reanimated by hatred. They wound themselves around Jean's ankles and held her fast. She made no move to escape from them. Her attacker's features showed no sign of triumph, no emotion at all. Tessa didn't even meet her gaze. Her concentration was reserved for the matter at hand.

The tendrils had bound her legs beneath the knees now, and they were pulling at her, trying to drag her down. Still, Phoenix didn't move. She reached out with her mind and felt the cold, dead creepers, as surely as if she had run her fingers across them. She tore at them, feeling resistance but overcoming it almost too easily. She watched as Tessa's lips twisted into a sullen pout-then, the black-clad young woman gestured sharply with one hand, and the tendrils burst into flame.

That was when Phoenix fought back, putting the full force of her mind into a single, decisive strike. She gathered up the flames, sculpted them into a roiling, blazing fireball and hurled it. Tessa threw up her hands and screamed as she was suddenly engulfed. The fire was not real, but it could have killed her nevertheless. She blinked out of sight, having withdrawn from the psychic plane before her mind could be destroyed. Phoenix took little pleasure from her victory. Tessa's telepathic abilities were slight: she could not have hoped to match the X-Man, especially not after

choosing psychic flames as her weapon. Jean's most difficult task had been to shield her, to ensure that she was not harmed before she could retreat.

"Now, Shaw," she muttered, turning back to the brick wall, "let's see what you've got!"

From the Beast's point of view, it all happened in seconds.

Phoenix closed her eyes, and suddenly Tessa cried out and almost fainted. She leaned against the wall, gasping for breath. And then, Shaw let out a pained grunt through gritted teeth. He shifted his balance awkwardly, and Hank could see that he was making a Herculean effort to remain standing. Phoenix's eyes flicked open, and they were an infernal red. For an instant, she and Shaw locked glares, each as intractable as the other, although Shaw was trembling and his forehead was drenched with sweat. Then Jean's expression softened, and her eyes faded to their natural green color. Shaw's eyes almost rolled back into his head, and he let out a shudder that was part dismay and part relief. He sagged like a puppet with its strings cut, but he recovered himself and rose shakily to his feet. He adjusted his black dressing gown and made an effort to regain his habitual composure-but when he spoke, his voice was a little hoarse and it sounded smaller than usual.

"You have what you came for, then," he said. Dryly, he added: "Congratulations!"

Phoenix was staring at him with a mixture of disbelief and contempt. "I can't believe that even you would countenance something so... so monstrous!"

Shaw turned his back to her. "You are trespassing in this building. Leave now, or I will be forced to summon the police."

"What is it, Jean?" asked Cyclops. "What did you see?"

Phoenix was already heading for one of the exits from the ballroom. "Come on," she said urgently. "We don't have any time to lose. I'll explain on the way."

Cyclops followed her without question, Storm a footstep behind. The Beast hesitated for an instant in the doorway, and glanced back at Shaw and Tessa. The Black King returned his gaze with a dark stare, and Hank was certain that a smile was pulling at his lips. Almost as if he knew something that the X-Men didn't.

He followed his teammates out of the room, and was alarmed to find that they were already out of sight. A corridor stretched ahead of him, its walls studded with doors and openings at irregular intervals. He could hear footsteps receding along the nearest side passageway, but how could the others have reached it so quickly? He had only been a second behind them.

Pushing that question to the back of his mind, the Beast loped after them—but by the time he had rounded the corner, the footsteps had stopped and he was alone again. He hurried along the corridor, becoming more and more worried as he passed each junction and saw nobody. He called out to his friends, but their names were swallowed by silence. He came to a halt, realizing that he was getting nowhere. "It's high time I took a moment to apply some logical deduction to my predicament," he muttered to himself. He paced the corridor in which he had found himself, pulling at his lower lip. The disappearance of his teammates was a physical impossibility—and the telepathic Tessa had been present when it had happened. It wasn't hard to guess, then, that she had messed with his mind somehow, probably in that moment when he had looked back. But what exactly had she done to him?

He tried the nearest door, applying his strength when it proved to be locked. With a splintering of wood, the Beast gained access to a small but expensively furnished office, smiling grimly to himself as he found what he was searching for. A wall clock told him that the time was twenty past nine. Almost an hour had passed since the X-Men had faced Shaw, and he had been completely unaware of it.

The question was, what had happened to the others during that lost time?

The X-Men had run into more Hellfire Club agents on the stairs. They had seemed fresh and alert, their uniforms immaculate. Cyclops couldn't imagine that they were the same people who had just been so comprehensively defeated in the ballroom. He had wondered just how many more mercenaries Shaw had stationed here.

Storm and the Beast had delayed their attackers, while Cyclops and Phoenix had cleared a path through them and headed deeper into the basement levels of the building. *We can't let the Hellfire Club set off that trident firework tonight*, Phoenix explained in response to Cyclops's telepathic questioning. *We have to destroy it!*

He was about to ask why, but then his wife threw open a door and they found themselves in a room which, to Jean's evident surprise, had been decorated like a nursery. The wallpaper was patterned with block capital letters of various colors, and building blocks littered the floor. Somewhere, a music box was playing a tinkling lullaby.

Sebastian Shaw stood beside a small crib in the center of the room. Cyclops didn't stop to question how he had beaten them here: a secret staircase or elevator, no doubt. He was more concerned with the fact that Shaw was holding a sleeping child in his arms. The boy was younger than when he had last seen him—no more than a year old—but Scott knew him all the same. "Nathan!" he gasped. The child stirred and gave a tiny gurgle at his father's voice.

Shaw was looking at Phoenix, a smirk on his face. "I'm sorry, my dear—is this not what you were expecting to find? It would seem that Tessa is a more accomplished telepath than you gave her credit for, no?"

Cyclops took two steps toward him, but held himself back. He couldn't risk harming the baby. "Get your filthy hands off my son!"

"I wondered if you would recognize him after all this time," said Shaw. "But you are mistaken, I'm afraid. Young Nathan is *my* son now."

Phoenix moved to Cyclops's side. "What are you talking about, Shaw?"

"Originally, it was to be a surprise for the boy's mother. She missed him so."

Scott's stomach tightened at the mention of his first wife. He had believed Jean Grey dead when he had married Madelyne Pryor. She had reminded him of his first and only love—not surprisingly, as she had proved to be an imperfect clone of Jean. But when Jean had returned, when Madelyne had lost her child and her husband, she had become bitter and, in time, twisted. She had joined the Hellfire Club and seduced its Black King.

"Nathan was taken to the future for a reason," insisted Scott. "He was suffering from a techno-organic virus. We had to accept that he was gone."

"Or perhaps you didn't love him enough to fight for him. Perhaps he was inconvenient. He got in the way of your aspirations, your dreams of saving the world."

"That's a lie!"

"You remember Fitzroy, of course: another former associate of mine. With his ability to create portals through time and space, it was a simple matter to locate young Nathan and pluck him out of his timeline, to give him a second chance of life here."

"You can't do that," said Phoenix quietly. "We spent time with Nathan in the future. We watched him grow up. He has a destiny to fulfill."

Shaw shrugged as if it didn't matter to him. "When Madelyne left me, of course, I had no further use for the boy. Nevertheless, after the considerable effort I put into obtaining fake documentation—birth certificate, vaccination records and the like, all of which confirm Madelyne and I as his natural parents—I think I'll keep him."

“Over my dead body, Shaw!” growled Scott, starting forward again. “I don’t think it needs to come to that.”

Phoenix laid a comforting hand on Cyclops’s shoulder. “You know you won’t get away with this,” she said, addressing Shaw. “We’ll demand a DNA test!”

“And it will mitigate in my favor,” said Shaw. “You are forgetting, my friends, that in this world of ours, money is the only universal language.”

He’s trying to provoke a response, teleported Phoenix. *Don’t give him the satisfaction.* She was telling Cyclops nothing he didn’t know—but her calming influence helped him to believe it. He took a deep, cleansing breath and tried to overrule his emotions. He had always possessed self-control in ample quantity: without it, his mutant power would have been a danger to everybody around him.

“Oh, I don’t doubt your persistence,” continued Shaw. “You may even take the boy from me in time. But how long? Five years? Ten? Certainly long enough for Nathan to learn the values of my organization, to become the worthy heir that Fate has denied me.”

“Why are you showing us this?” snapped Cyclops.

“I am not a heartless man,” said Shaw, turning away as he lowered the child into his bed. “I thought you might wish to spend a few minutes with him—to say goodbye.” -

Scott knew there was more to it than that. Shaw wouldn’t have shown his hand like this without good reason. Or perhaps it was just that he couldn’t enjoy his victory over his longtime foes unless he could tell them about it. Perhaps he enjoyed the anguish in Cyclops’s expression, the ache that Shaw must have known was in his heart. Now that he was no longer holding Nathan, Scott wanted to punch him, blast him, return some of that hurt. But his son was awake now, and reaching through the bars of the crib to him.

“You have ten minutes,” said Shaw as he passed Cyclops on his way to the door. “And be advised that this room is

surrounded by armed mercenaries. Should you attempt to take my son, then their orders are to shoot him first!”

That was the final straw. Cyclops whirled around, swore at Shaw and opened his visor. A full-strength eye-beam struck its target in the back, but Shaw was unfazed by it. He would have absorbed the con-cussive force of the blast, Scott realized; its energy component would have caused him some pain, but not nearly enough.

Shaw paused in the doorway and looked back at Cyclops with one eyebrow raised in mild amusement. Ashamed that he had let himself be pushed over the edge, Scott made no further move until after the Black King had left and there was silence in the nursery.

Then, Jean linked her arm gently with his, and they approached the crib together.

The Beast had retraced his steps to the ballroom, planning to confront Shaw and Tessa. But as he approached the open doorway, he was greeted by a sight that filled him with horror.

The morning sun shone through the ballroom windows and fell upon three bodies. They lay in a heap, unmoving, and their blood was soaking into the deep pile carpet.

Hank ran to them with a despairing cry. Cyclops and Storm were already dead, their throats tom out by the claws of some wild animal. Phoenix’s eyes fluttered open, but they widened in fear when she saw the Beast. She took a sharp intake of breath and tried to ward him off with a feeble hand, tried to cry out for help. “It’s all right, Jeannie.” Hank was so distraught that he hardly knew what he was saying. How could this have happened? It still seemed like only minutes ago that the X-Men had had the upper hand. “It’s only me. It’s Hank. It’s all right now. I’m here. Everything will be all right.” But Phoenix’s fear didn’t fade-and even as the Beast watched, the light fled from his dear friend’s eyes.

It was too much to take in. It had all happened too quickly. He felt numb. There were claw marks on Phoenix’s

throat too. He thought about her reaction to him, and was hit by a dreadful realization. He didn't want to do it, didn't want to look down at his own hands, didn't want to face the proof of what he already knew. But he had no choice. He had to see.

An eternity seemed to pass as the Beast stared at his torn nails, at the blood that matted his blue fur, and everything else was blotted out by the awful truth of what he had done.

"Your worst fear, is it not?"

He looked up, shaken back to reality, only dimly recognizing the voice of Sebastian Shaw.

"Ever since your mutant gene manifested itself," said the Black King, "ever since you coined your own ironic code name—all these years, you have dreaded the next stage of your evolution. You immersed yourself in science and literature, exercising your intellect for fear of losing it. You always knew that your body chemistry could change, that your mind could snap at any moment—that you could become a Beast in deed as well as in appearance."

The Beast didn't stop to wonder how Shaw knew so much about his innermost feelings. He lunged at him, hoping to take him by surprise. "You made me do this!" he cried.

And then he was in hand-to-hand combat, but his foe was unmoved, simply absorbing the kinetic energy of his blows. The Beast tried to unbalance Shaw with leverage rather than force, but he only found himself staring into his eyes and seeing the harsh gleam of triumph therein. "Tessa tells me," said the Black King smugly, "that you were easy to manipulate. You were so close to becoming a savage already."

"I'll kill you, Shaw!" he roared. But his blows had added to Shaw's own strength, and he was outmatched. The Beast's hold on his foe was broken, and he was hurled across the ballroom by an almost casual sweep of an energized arm. He managed to turn his flight into a flip and

land upright, but he was crouching beside the corpses of his colleagues now, and he could feel their blood, wet on his bare feet. His stomach performed a nauseating pitch and he could no longer think about fighting back. He could only think about what he had done, what terrible part of himself had been unleashed by Tessa, and he wanted to roll himself into a tight ball and shut out the rest of the world until the pain and the guilt had gone away.

“He’s all yours, gentlemen,” said Shaw-and the Beast became aware of the fact that four more people had entered the room. Police officers. They approached him warily, their guns trained upon him, but he made no move to resist them. One of the officers hauled him to his feet, wrenched his arms behind his back and cuffed his wrists together. Another read him his rights, but Hank wasn’t listening. All he heard was the charge that had been laid against him: murder. That one word echoed through his mind, and chilled his blood.

But as he was led toward the exit, a defiant spirit rose within him. He was no good to the remaining X-Men, no good to anybody, if he was locked in a prison cell. And Shaw had to be stopped: Phoenix had said as much, even if she hadn’t had time to fill in the details.

It was the work of seconds for the Beast to wriggle free of his handcuffs. But one of the policemen saw that he was free, and shouted a warning to his fellows.

As Hank made for the exit, gunfire exploded around him.

The Hellfire Club building was closing in around Storm.

Its walls and its ceilings were shifting, but never when she was looking directly at them. She just knew that the corridors were narrower and lower than when she had first entered them. She tried to tell herself that she was imagining things, that there was no need to panic. But each door she opened, every corner she rounded, only led her into another corridor, identical to the last but for the fact that it was almost imperceptibly smaller. Even when she

tried to turn back, she found that the layout of the passageways had altered behind her. She was walking round in circles—and she was certain that the lights had dimmed.

“Cyclops?” she called, her voice more timid than she had intended. “Phoenix?”

No sound came back to her, but for that of her own heavy breathing.

She could place her hands flat against the ceiling now, or against both walls at once. The building was definitely shrinking, like a living thing, trying to smother her.

She offered a whispered appeal to her deity. “Bright Lady . . .”

Ever since childhood, Ororo Munroe had had a fear of enclosed spaces. She kept on moving, kept on hoping, because she couldn’t afford to stop, couldn’t let herself think too hard about what was happening. She couldn’t think about being buried again.

A part of her railed against the unfairness of it. She had come to terms with her claustrophobia; at least, she had thought she had. She knew that it would never go away, but she had reached a point where she had felt able to cope with her problem. Until recently.

Recently, her resolve had been sorely tested. Three weeks ago, Storm had been trapped in a cave-in at an underground installation. A week before that, she had been buried alive. Or rather, she reminded herself, she had been forced to *believe* that she was buried alive by another of Shaw’s telepathic associates. Not that it made any difference. The all-consuming darkness, the stale air and the cramped confines of the coffin still haunted her dreams.

It was typical of the Hellfire Club to zero in upon the weakness of a foe and to exploit it for all it was worth. Storm bitterly resented what Madelyne Pryor had done to her. She resented the anguish that she had been put through simply for having the courage to stand up for what was right. And

her resentment manifested itself all around her as the temperature began to drop and a buildup of electricity made the air itself sizzle.

"I am not prepared to play your games, Shaw!" she shouted, sure that somehow her tormentor could hear her. She lashed out with a lightning bolt: it stabbed into the wall where the corridor turned, some way ahead of her, leaving a jagged hole in the plasterwork and in the bricks behind it. Storm soared toward it, carried by the wind, and climbed through.

She found herself in another corridor, identical to the one she had just left—but now she had to stoop to keep from hitting her head on the ceiling. She turned, and caught her breath as she saw that the hole she had made had sealed itself up, leaving no sign that it had existed.

She was panting now, on the verge of hyperventilation, and she could hear her heart beating. "Goddess," she muttered to herself, "this cannot be happening!"

And suddenly, unexpectedly, Ororo found a fragment of hope to cling on to: the hope that this really *wasn't* happening, that it was another of the Hellfire Club's mind tricks. And once that hope was born within her, it grew, and it comforted her with its perfect logic. Closing her eyes, she tried to forget the walls around her, to concentrate on the hope, which she repeated like a mantra. "This cannot be happening, this cannot be happening. . . ."

And slowly, she drew herself to her full height, and nothing stopped her.

Ororo Munroe smiled, experiencing in her relief a tiny moment of blissful serenity.

And then, she opened her eyes to find that she had never left the ballroom.

Shaw was still there, as was Tessa. And there was a third person present: an attractive young woman whom Ororo found vaguely familiar. Her brunette hair fell straight down to her shoulders, and she was clad from neck to toe in form-

fitting black leather. Her lips were pursed into a smirk to match Shaw's own.

"Very impressive," purred Shaw. "Of all the X-Men, I expected Phoenix to see through your illusions first."

"She could dismiss them with ease," admitted the woman. "She has the power. But she has to choose to employ it-and she does not yet suspect anything."

"You can see now why I hold Miss Munroe in such high regard." Storm was still trying to take in her new situation. Cyclops and Phoenix were on their knees, distraught, their arms wrapped around each other. The Beast was struggling as if with unseen assailants—but as Ororo watched, he seemed to break free of them. A shadow of concern flickered across Shaw's face as the X-Man bounded toward the door. "Miss Wyngarde . . .?" he said.

"I have it covered," said the young woman confidently-and suddenly, the Beast stiffened and fell as if he had been shot in the back.

That was when Storm remembered where she had seen the woman before. She had studied a photograph of her after Wolverine and another fellow X-Man, Gambit, had reported encountering her in London. She had been using the name Martinique Jason, but a little research had exposed her as Regan Wyngarde, the daughter of one of the X-Men's oldest enemies.

Jason Wyngarde had gone by the code name of Mastermind. He had died a few months ago, another victim of the Legacy Virus-but this new Lady Mastermind was carrying on the family tradition. Like her father, she had the mutant power to create sophisticated illusions— but hers were more effective than his had ever been, because she was also a low-grade telepath. She could rifle through the minds of her victims, finding inspiration for her creations in their nightmares. Storm was sick of being manipulated by people like her.

The quickest way to free her teammates was to remove the source of their delusions. Storm tensed herself, and whipped up a wind on which to sail—but even as she started toward Lady Mastermind, she slammed into an unseen barrier. Groggily, she picked herself up to see that Shaw's smirk had widened, almost reaching his ears now. And there was somebody else in the room; somebody who had entered quietly behind her.

"I do beg your pardon," said Shaw. "I have not introduced you to the final member of our quartet. But then, I believe you two have met." Storm already knew who had felled her. She had recognized his power signature: the application of pure magnetic force. She had felt it many times before. And she knew now that the battle was lost. Shaw and Tessa, she could have bested; Lady Mastermind too, at a pinch. But not him. Not the X-Men's first, deadliest and most bitter foe.

Not the mutant known as Magneto.

CHAPTER 5

ICEMAN WAS exhausted. He felt as if he had spent the whole night running, although in fact he had spent much of the past few hours

in hiding, crouching in the shadows of the forest and waiting for

the sounds of footsteps or voices or aircar engines to recede.

He had been forced to fight just once: he had been lying in the shade of a thorny bush, straining his ears to confirm that what he had heard ahead of him had been no more than a rustle of a bird's wings, when a mutate had stumbled across him. To his chagrin, the woman had been a heat-generator. Mindful of the need to take her down before she could raise the alarm, Iceman had pushed himself to his limit. He had dampened her down with a snow coating and rendered her unconscious with his fists. Then, sacrificing caution, he had run, getting as far away from her as he could before she was found.

Throughout his nerve-wracking flight, he had remained in his ice form, comforted by the limited protection that his frozen armor would afford him from unexpected attacks. Now, -he was beginning to regret that decision. A familiar muzzy feeling told him that he had overextended himself, he was using his body's moisture faster than he could replenish it. Narrow rivulets of water were already beginning to run down his chest, but he didn't dare return to his human form. Not now.

He had reached the edge of the woods, and he could see man-made structures and a few lights ahead of him. He was disappointed, but not surprised, to see that the architecture was wrong for Hammer Bay. He had tried to head toward the Genoshan capital, but he had become disoriented in the

darkness. Nevertheless, any reasonably-sized settlement offered him a chance to lose himself in its streets, to become anonymous among its people. The only problem was, he would have to cross a wide area of open scrub land to reach this one. He would be exposed.

He hesitated for long minutes, pondering the wisdom of his plan. But he concluded that he had no choice. He had detected no sign of pursuit for over half an hour now—and the sooner he got this over with, he told himself, the sooner he could rest.

He gathered up his courage and made a run for it. But in the scant moonlight, he had misjudged the distance to the buildings: no matter how many steps he took toward them, they never seemed to draw closer. And suddenly, he heard an aircar engine behind him.

He glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes wide with fear. The silver vehicle had appeared from nowhere, swooping toward him from above the trees, its two uniformed occupants shouting and pointing at him. Iceman gritted his teeth and tried to ignore them, tried to ignore the protesting of his leg muscles and the pounding of his heart against his chest as he drove himself on. He created an ice slide for himself, forming each section in front of his feet an instant before he skated onto it. It was his customary mode of transport, whenever he needed speed; he had not used it before as its residue would have pointed straight to him, but that hardly mattered now. However, the effort required to maintain the slide was almost too much, setting off a trip hammer inside his head.

The village loomed before him, tantalizingly close. He was almost upon it now.

But then, a well-placed shot from one of the aircar's blaster weapons shattered the slide behind him. Its anchor to the ground destroyed, it collapsed. Iceman hit the hard turf in a hail of fragments, and his armor dissipated. He was flesh and blood and vulnerable, and the aircar sounded as if

it were directly above him. Panicking, he clenched his fists and tried to force his unwilling body to "ice up" again. To no avail. The pain in his head was extreme, and his vision misted over. He scrambled back to his feet and set off again with lurching, faltering steps, not sure how far he had to go, not knowing even if he was heading in the right direction. He expected to be engulfed in flames at any second.

There was an explosion of sound behind him, and Iceman cried out as he flung himself to the ground, in no doubt that he had just heard the killing shot. He would die with his nose and mouth full of Genosha's barren soil. But slowly, incredibly, his muddled brain began to register the fact that there was no pain, no dimming of the light. Just the sound of his own shallow breathing as it echoed inside his eardrums.

And then footsteps, thundering across the earth to each side of him.

Nightcrawler's progress through the forest had been painfully slow. He had expected his teammate to recover at any moment, but if anything his condition had worsened. Wolverine had staggered along at Kurt's side, their arms around each other's shoulders, but Logan had become heavier as he had leaned increasingly on his friend for support, his chin sagging further toward his chest. At one point, he had started to mutter nonsensical words as if he had become delirious, and his forehead had been hot to the touch.

Kurt had inspected the gash in Logan's side, dismayed to find that it was still bleeding. He had torn his friend's shirt into strips and used it to bandage the wound. Fortunately, it was a warm night. He would have used his own shirt, had he been wearing one-but his civilian clothing, like his human face, had been an insubstantial product of the image inducer. He wore only his fighting clothes: a one-piece red tunic with a plunging neckline.

Hoping to confuse his hunters, Nightcrawler had headed away from his true target, the capital. When the village had

come into sight at the edge of the woods, he had decided to take a chance. With the aircars still loud above him, he hadn't wanted to risk dragging his cumbersome charge across open land, so he had teleported with him instead. They had materialized in the shadow of a burnt-out building, Nightcrawler feeling as if his insides had been put through a blender. Wolverine had been sick on the ground, and had responded to Kurt's expressions of concern with a series of grunts.

The village was much smaller than Hammer Bay, its buildings shorter and more angular. Still, it looked as if it had once been a pleasant enough place to live. But now, its office blocks had crumbled and its houses had been firebombed out. Walls were blackened with soot, the streets ankle-deep in litter. The sewers had backed up, and a rotting stench permeated the night air. The lawns and parks had been neglected, their flowers strangled by weeds, and small, unidentifiable creatures nested in the uncut grass.

Nightcrawler had found a place to rest, on a pile of refuse sacks behind an overflowing dumpster in a dark alleyway. He hadn't wanted to investigate any of the buildings, empty though they seemed, for fear of finding squatters. Neither of the X-Men was in any condition for another fight. One of the sacks had split open, oozing rusted tin cans and soft food waste. He didn't like to think about what was in the rest of them.

Wolverine shifted and groaned in his arms. He had passed out for a few minutes, but now his eyes fluttered open. He looked confused, lost, but he tried to drag himself to his feet. Kurt held him down, relieved all the same that he was moving again. "Take it easy," he said, "you took a nasty scratch back there. You need to give your healing factor a little more time to do its work." His gaze flicked involuntarily to the scraps that bound Wolverine's side. His blood had soaked them through.

“Feels... different,” murmured Logan. “What did that... witch do to me?”

“Nothing your body can’t handle,” said Kurt, “if you give it a chance.”

Wolverine shook his head insistently. “Didn’t just... cut me. Feel dizzy, sick... poisoned my blood. ...” He closed his eyes again and took a long, shuddering breath.

Nightcrawler hadn’t realized before how pale he looked. “It will pass, *meinfreund*,” he assured him, but he was no longer sure of anything himself. Kurt had been counting on Logan’s remarkable physiognomy to pull him through this, to restore him to health. Now, he was beginning to worry that, whatever had happened to him, it was far too serious for that.

Iceman didn’t want to move. But he had to know what was happening.

With a supreme effort, ignoring a dozen aches and pains, he rolled over onto his back and tried to make some sense of what he could see from his worm’s eye point of view.

There were scraps of metal in the scrub, and he realized that the aircar had crashed. That must have been the noise he had heard: the rending of metal, although he was sure there had been something else too, something more insistent and high-pitched, more dangerous. One of the car’s former occupants was lying facedown, limbs splayed out, beside the main body of the wreckage. The other was on his feet, but he had come under attack. He appeared to possess great strength, and he was fighting hard, but he was outnumbered. The six newcomers varied in age and gender: a teenaged boy had leapt onto the mutate’s back and was pummeling at his head, while an elderly woman was aiming swipes at him with a metal walking cane as she hurled choice insults. Nor did they identify themselves with costumes or uniforms. They wore normal, everyday clothes, a little untidy perhaps—and as far as Iceman could see, they had no supernormal powers.

Nevertheless, the mutate fell to his knees beneath the sustained onslaught. And that was when a middle-aged, heavyset man with a graying beard stepped forward, reached under his loose-fitting, khaki-colored shirt and produced a gun from his waistband.

The rest of the group deferred to the bearded man, stepping aside as he approached the defeated mutate and leveled the gun at his temple. Their expressions were calm, almost neutral, and this fooled Iceman into thinking that the man did not intend to pull the trigger, that the weapon had been drawn only as a threat. That was why he didn't say anything, why he didn't try to stop the cold-blooded execution until it was too late.

Not that he could have done much. As he pulled himself to his feet, he felt his head spinning and his stomach lurching, and not only because of the grisly sight he had just witnessed. He almost fell again, but he settled upon the compromise position of stooping to rest his hands on his calves as he tried to get his breath back.

He hadn't realized until now how close his mad flight had brought him to the outskirts of the village. Its nearest building was only a few yards away. His unlikely saviors must have come from there. They must have seen that he was in trouble. He didn't know whether to feel grateful to them or just sickened by what they had done to their helpless captive.

Then, the bearded man blew imaginary smoke from his gun barrel like a cowboy in an old Western movie and, in a gruff voice, he said: "Score two points for our side. That's another pair of stinking muties who won't be polluting our good, clean air any more!"

And even Iceman's powers could not allay the prickly chill that broke out all over his skin as his erstwhile rescuers moved to surround him.

"Mutates in magistrates' clothing," mumbled Wolverine for the fourth time, shaking his head in lethargic disbelief. His eyes were closed, but he seemed to want to keep talking, to keep his mind active. Nightcrawler, for his part, longed to sleep-but worrying about his friend's condition and the possibility of discovery kept him awake and alert, albeit with a dull ache spreading slowly behind his eyes.

"I know what you mean," he said. "These are our own kind, and yet they have been turned against us. It does not seem so long ago that they would have welcomed us into their land."

"X-Men ... helped to free them ... we told ... we told the world. . .

Kurt nodded sadly. He had not been with Wolverine and the others when they had first visited Genosha, when they had exposed its darkest secret, but he had heard the story. He thought about everything that had happened here since, all the misery that civil war had brought to this once-fair island, and he wondered briefly if his colleagues should have left well enough alone. But that would have meant condemning many more people—an entire race—to generations of slavery, of being denied their very identities. Sometimes, it was important to make a stand, whatever the consequences.

"And now," he sighed, "they see Magneto as their one hope of salvation. They will do anything for him. How did it come to this, *mein freund*? Should we have done more?"

"Magneto," snarled Logan, his hatred for Genosha's ruler seeming to energize him temporarily. "He did this. He took their pain and their anger, and he used it. Did what the... the humans did to him ... made them as bitter and twisted as ... as he is. ..."

"He made them paranoid, taught them to distrust anyone who is different."

"He ... put them in... magistrates' clothing."

Kurt added quietly: "Magneto has turned the mutants into everything they once hated."

The pair lapsed into a reflective silence, then, and Kurt soon realized that his friend had drifted off to sleep. He hoped it would do him good—but Logan's breaths rattled in his chest, and his skin was now cold to the touch. Kurt didn't like to untie the blood-sodden bandages to see if his wound looked any better, if the tissue had begun to knit back

together. All he could do was keep him warm with his own body heat, and say a silent prayer for him. He feared that it would not be enough, that Wolverine might not survive the night.

When he heard footsteps and low voices from the direction of the street, he was torn by indecision. Logan was making too much noise, snoring and rasping. If anyone stopped at the mouth of the alleyway to listen, they would hear him for sure. But it seemed cruel to wake him, at least until it was absolutely necessary.

He decided to reconnoiter. He untangled himself from his friend, laying Logan's head down gently on one of the refuse sacks, and padded softly toward the source of the disturbance. Hidden by the shadows, he peered out onto the sidewalk and saw a small group of people—two men and a woman—conducting an urgent, whispered conversation. They wore skinsuits, but no uniforms. They were probably civilians. Perhaps they weren't loyal to Magneto at all; even some of the mutants must have chosen to resist his rule.

Under normal circumstances, Nightcrawler would have assumed the strangers hostile. It was the safest way. But Wolverine, he had become convinced, was in need of proper medical treatment, and maybe they could provide it.

He strained to overhear what the mutants were saying, to get some idea of whose side they were on, but to no avail. He wanted to believe in human nature, in the essential goodness of the spirit, but he had seen its dark side too many times. Looking over his shoulder, he could just about make out his teammate's body, an unmoving lump. Then Wolverine stirred and let out a soft howl of pain like that of a dying animal, and Nightcrawler's decision was made.

In the X-Men's Blackbird, during the flight from America, he had programmed a few useful costume changes into his image inducer. He activated it now, leaving his features the same but clothing himself in an illusory skinsuit of blue and

red. Then, he teleported past the mutates, thinking that if things went badly, at least he would have led them away from Logan. They reacted with predictable alarm to his sudden noisy appearance, and he threw up his hands and called to them, in his best Genoshan accent: "I mean you no harm!"

They didn't attack him, but he could see suspicion in their eyes. He took two steps toward them, and continued: "My name's Kurt. Kurt Wagner. I'm a mutate, like you. You can see that, can't you?" He just hoped that his fame as a member of the X-Men hadn't preceded him.

"What do you want?" asked the woman, regarding him through narrowed eyes.

"I don't recognize you," said the older of the two men. "Where are you from?"

Kurt tried to recall what little he knew of Genoshan geography, to find an area that was just far enough away. "Carrion Cove," he hazarded.

The mutates exchanged glances. "That's a human stronghold!" exclaimed the younger man.

Kurt nodded eagerly. "My friend and I were being held there. We were forced to keep serving the humans. We escaped two nights ago, and we've been on the run ever since. You don't know how relieved I am to see friendly faces again."

"Your friend?" repeated the older man.

Kurt took a deep breath before he told them about Logan—but he was winning these people over, and lying to them at this stage would only undo that. Still, he was deliberately vague about the nature and the cause of Wolverine's injury. The older man rubbed his stubbly chin in thought. Then, finally, he nodded. "We don't have much in the way of facilities, but we'll certainly do all we can to help a brother."

Kurt let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he beamed. "God bless you!"

He led the mutants to the alleyway, where they took in Wolverine's condition. A sad shake of the head passed between the older man and the woman when they thought Kurt wasn't looking. Nevertheless, they put Logan's arms around their shoulders and lifted him between them. He groaned again, but didn't open his eyes. "We'll do what we can for him," said the man. "We can make him more comfortable, at least. We'll take him to our main base."

Kurt nodded dispiritedly, and returned to the street at the rear of the unlikely procession. They trudged along in silence for a few minutes, before the younger man fell back to walk beside him. "If you've come from Carrion Cove," he confided, "you'll find things a lot better here. The humans don't come to this area much. Not if they know what's good for them."

"I had heard that, in the rest of the county, the war was over," said Kurt cautiously.

The man scowled. "It will never be over until the last flatscan has left Genosha."

Ahead of them, the woman started and looked around, as if afraid that somebody might have overheard him. "The Savior has decreed otherwise," she shot back.

"Of course," said the man hastily, "and I don't mean to question his judgement." Turning back to Kurt, he explained: "You probably know that our borders have been closed. Magneto doesn't want any more of the humans to leave."

"We need their skills," said the woman, "to rebuild."

"They kept us mindless, servile, for so long," said the young man bitterly. "We only know how to do menial jobs. But now, Magneto has set up training facilities for us. Within a few years, we will be self-sufficient. We won't need the flatscans any more." His tone made it quite clear how much he relished that prospect.

"In the meantime," the older man reminded him, beginning to struggle with Wolverine's weight, "we have to be careful. The humans are still out there."

“The Savior has instructed that our two races shouldn’t mix,” said the woman.

“But that doesn’t matter to the flatscans,” snorted the young man. “They’re animals! All they know is hating and killing. Some of them will work for Magneto, because they’re afraid, but secretly they still want us dead.” He puffed out his chest with pride as he added: “Fortunately, they’re weak and they’re stupid. We’ve all but wiped them out in this area. This will be a pure mutate village soon, and we won’t have to put up with their stink.”

Kurt wanted to say something, to tell the young mutate that hatred couldn’t be fought with more hatred. But, for Wolverine’s sake, he couldn’t afford to jeopardize his cover. He took Logan’s arm from the older man, shouldering the burden of his teammate even though he was still tired himself, and walked on in glum silence.

Eventually, they turned into a narrow side street. There were streetlights here, but only one of them was still working, looking forlorn in the center of its orange circle. “No humans in the vicinity,” reported the woman, who must have had some kind of scanning ability—and the group approached a battered, two-story house about halfway along a terraced row. The door hung open, its blue paint peeling, and the dingy, musty hallway showed no signs of recent habitation. However, the older man led the way confidently toward a smaller wooden door beneath the stairs, which he unlocked with a large brass key.

Nightcrawler was struck speechless again as he helped to haul Wolverine down a short flight of rickety steps. He was in what had once been a low-ceilinged cellar, but its side walls had been broken through to the cellars on each side, and he could see that the process had been repeated beyond them. The mutates had probably joined all the cellars on this side of the road together. Lighting was provided by bare bulbs strung on an electrical cord, which wended its way haphazardly through the base at head

height. Most of them had been turned off for the night; either that or they weren't working. Most of the available floor area, at least as far as Kurt could see, was taken up by old mattresses and dirty, tattered sheets.

This room alone was home to at least twenty mutants, most of them still wearing the skinsuits that must have been permanent reminders of their days of slavery. Some of them stirred in their beds to look up at the new arrivals, but most slept on. A couple sat at a wooden table, devouring hunks of stale bread from cracked tin plates.

The older man glanced back at Kurt, and he must have seen his appalled expression because he smiled tightly and without humor. "Welcome to our home," he said. "We're free citizens these days, so they tell us."

"There was no need to murder that man."

The lynch mob had closed in around Iceman now, and he was trying to stall them, trying to delay the moment when their gray-bearded leader would put the gun to his head too. He didn't have the energy to transform himself again, and his ice armor probably wouldn't have saved him anyway, not from a bullet at this range. Perhaps if he could buy a little more time, another minute or two, he might be able to gum up the gun barrel with slush. He might be able to take its wielder by surprise and run for it in the confusion. He might just stand a chance of escaping. A very small chance. But he couldn't think of any clever words to say, so he had just blurted out the first thing that had come to him.

The bearded man snorted with cruel laughter. "The only good mutant is a dead mutant!"

"He would have killed you," said a young, slim woman with dark hair, "without a qualm."

"Debs is right, love. It's the only language those genejokes understand." The elderly woman was waving her cane sternly, drawing Bobby's attention to her. His lips tightened at the insult but he said nothing. "It's kill or be killed these days, you mark my words!"

“What did you do?” The bearded man sounded surprisingly genial. Iceman turned to face him again, confused. “To get the GUMPs on your case? You tried to get out?”

“Um ... yes,” he stammered, guessing that the “GUMPs” were the border guards. “Yes, that’s right, I was trying to get out.” Bobby was beginning to realize that he had misread the situation. These people mustn’t have seen his ice slide, mustn’t have seen him at all until after his powers had given out. They had no reason to suspect that he, because of an accident of his birth, represented everything they hated. As far as they were concerned, he was just a fresh-faced young man dressed in a simple T-shirt and slacks. He made a mental note to thank Rogue for insisting that he wear civilian clothing on this mission.

They were expecting him to say more, so, mentally crossing his fingers, he added: “I mean, I know Magneto doesn’t want people ... humans, I mean ... to leave the country, but... but, well, I didn’t think he’d go this far.”

“He’s a mutant, isn’t he?” said somebody behind Bobby. “They’ll stop at nothing to make our lives miserable. They’re animals!”

“What I mean is, I didn’t expect his guards to shoot to kill. I... I just wanted to get away from here.” To his relief, the general reaction to his story was one of sympathy rather than disbelief. Hoping to change the subject while he was ahead, he added quickly: “I was lucky you came along when you did. How did you manage to bring the aircar down?”

“Sonic sphere,” said the bearded man proudly. “Old magistrate technology. We set it up a few days ago. Those genejokes flew right into it; it shook their car to pieces. That’ll show them who owns this town!”

“The thing is, dear,” said the old woman, “even if we could leave Genosha, we’d never get away from them, not completely. They’re everywhere these days, the muties,

waiting to strike. You can't even tell who's human any more. Not these days."

"No," said Iceman, forcing himself to nod. He wasn't enjoying the irony of the situation at all. "I know what you mean."

"Even America's swarming with them," agreed the teenaged boy. "You see it on the news all the time—at least you used to, before it was censored."

"And they'll destroy the proud United States as surely as they've destroyed our country," said the bearded man as if making a casual statement of fact. "That's why you can't run, son. Oh, plenty have tried—many families made a run for it as soon as they heard we'd been sold out. They escaped before that mutant fascist arrived, and good luck to them. But what kind of a legacy are they leaving for their kids, huh? Somebody's got to make a stand. Somebody's got to draw the line somewhere, or human beings will end up as extinct as the caveman!"

"This used to be a green and pleasant land," said the old woman wistfully.

"And it will be again," the bearded man promised her, "if we can stand together!" He extended a hand toward Bobby. "The name's Hendrickson. Are you with us, son?"

Iceman stared at him, then realized that his uncertainty was drawing suspicion. "Bobby," he said quickly. "Bobby Drake." And he reached out and took the proffered hand, hating himself for doing it but knowing that he had no other option. "I'm with you."

The mutants had taken Wolverine into a former wine cellar, one part of which was sectioned off by high shelves and equipped with four real beds. He had been lain in one; the other three were unoccupied. His wound had been washed and redressed, and he had been given antibiotics and plenty of water. Nightcrawler hoped it would be enough. At least his friend appeared to be sleeping peacefully now.

He had insisted on staying with Logan. The chair beside his bed was uncomfortable, but Kurt had fallen into a light doze anyway. His dreams were populated by the mutates. Even when they had been slaves, they had at least been kept in comfortable conditions. But the civil war had bankrupted Genosha, and their current lives of poverty seemed a high price to pay for liberation. He only hoped that, one day, it would prove to be worth it.

Woken by a scuffling sound, he saw that several people had joined him at the bedside. The three mutates from outside were among them, but Kurt's eyes were drawn to a thin, bald-headed man with sunken eyes and bloodless, disapproving lips, who stood a head above the others. The man wore white robes-made out of a bed sheet, he fancied-over a yellow and black skinsuit. Looking at Kurt, he twisted his mouth into an approximation of a smile, exposing black-capped teeth, although his eyes had a steel glint. "I am sorry to disturb you," he said in a low voice that seemed to reverberate inside his chest, "but I believe your friend is in need of assistance."

"You're a doctor?" asked Kurt hopefully.

"In a manner of speaking. I tend to the immortal soul." The other mutates had gathered around the bed, and Kurt stood at its foot. This placed him directly opposite the bald man, who took Wolverine's head in his huge hands, rolled his own head back and closed his eyes. His thin lips fluttered as he recited incantations to himself. Then, he said: "The life force of our brother is weak. We must pray for him." Nightcrawler's heart sank. Much as he believed in the power of prayer, he had hoped for-expected, for a moment—more practical assistance. He had hoped that this newcomer was a healer, if not by profession then by virtue of a mutant gene. Nevertheless, he bowed his head respectfully, as did the mutates, and clasped his hands in front of him. He concentrated on the words of the prayer and offered up his own plea to God.

“Lord, we beseech you to heed the words of your humble priest, and the hopes of your loyal supplicants. We, who have suffered so much and yet believe that you will lead us to a brighter tomorrow, ask that you show mercy upon our fallen brother. We ask that he be made well and strong again, that he might assist in the rebuilding of your green and pleasant land. We pray that you might grant him a small portion of your infinite power of magnetism.”

Nightcrawler blinked, and his stomach performed a cartwheel. “Amen,” said the Priest and the mutants in unison.

The Priest reached out in front of him, his hands hovering above Wolverine’s chest. And something crackled beneath his downturned palms: a bright blue discharge of energy, which grew to encircle his sleeping patient and then faded as if it had been absorbed into his body. The Priest’s face softened into a beatific expression, and he whispered: “Thank you, Lord.”

Then, his blue eyes snapped open, seeming to drill into Nightcrawler’s head as if they could see the uncertainty, the discomfort, he was feeling.

“All praise to the Savior,” intoned the Priest. “All praise Magneto.” “All praise Magneto,” the mutants repeated. “All praise Magneto.” Nightcrawler tried to join in the chant, but his throat had stopped. He moved his lips instead, hoping that his inability to give voice to the words would not be noticed.

But he felt cold and sick inside.

t sim

SUNLIGHT SHONE through Rogue’s eyelids. The air was warm, and moist with morning dew. She didn’t know where she was at

_first; she couldn’t work out why there was hard soil beneath her

cheek. But then, feeling an insistent toe between her ribs, she forced her eyes open, raised herself up onto her

hands and found herself looking into a gun barrel. And behind it, the image still blurred, she could see magistrates' uniforms.

"On your feet, mutie," somebody snarled, "and don't try nothing. We got guns!"

"I can see that," said Rogue, picking herself up wearily. "Don't worry, I don't have the energy to make a break for it. So easy with those trigger fingers, you hear?"

"Well, this is a real find, isn't it? A real live mutie, lying in this field by herself. Where are your genejoke friends, mutie?"

Rogue blinked, and brought her captors into focus. There were six of them, their faces concealed by blue metal gas masks, each armed with rifles. Behind them, the sun was rising over Hammer Bay, washing its fractured buildings in a bloody shade of red that seemed unnervingly appropriate. "You aren't mutates?" she ventured.

The group's apparent leader spat through his speaking grille. Rogue saw stripes of rank on his shoulder. "We're human beings, you mutate bitch: pure, decent people. We've nothing in common with your kind." His comrades murmured agreement.

"What makes you think I'm a mutate?" asked Rogue. She tried to sound aggrieved at the accusation, but she was struggling to keep her temper.

"You came down with the aircars, didn't you?" said another man, nodding toward the wreckage that strewn the field behind her. "Only a freak could have survived that. Look at you—there's not a scratch on you!"

"I guess I must have been lucky," said Rogue evenly. "I must have been thrown clear. Anyway, you're the ones who are dressed like Magneto's militia!"

The magistrates' leader slapped her across the face. Fortunately, his hand was gloved. Rogue flinched as if the blow had hurt her—so long as they didn't know anything

about her powers, she had an advantage-but she fixed him with a baleful glare.

"These uniforms used to be a symbol of authority," he snarled. "The magistrates used to keep order in these parts; we had respect. Now, we've got stinking gene freak terrorists and human traitors running around in our clothes."

"Magneto calls them the Genoshan Unified Military Patrol-what a joke!"

"Well, that's gonna change. We're gonna take back our uniforms and we're gonna take back our country!" A ragged cheer greeted the leader's words.

"Well, bully for you!" said Rogue dryly. "But in case you hadn't noticed, sugar, I'm not wearing anybody's uniform, and I don't want any part of this here squabble of yours."

She had intended to say more. She had concocted a story about how she, a normal human being going about her lawful business, had been kidnapped by fanatical mutants, how she had taken them by surprise and knocked their flier off-course. But she couldn't bring herself to tell the lie, to toady up to scum like this. Anyway, she was feeling better now: well enough, she was sure, to take them on if they came at her. The odds were only six to one, after all.

"I know you!" said one of the magistrates suddenly, stepping forward. The voice sounded female, although the heavy, padded costume made it hard to tell for sure. "You came here a few weeks ago. I saw you flying over Hammer Bay!" She turned to the others excitedly "She *is* a genejoke, she is! She's one of those American mutants-X-Men, they're called."

"As if we don't have enough freaks of our own," somebody muttered.

"That skunk hair is a dead giveaway, honey!" said the woman.

Most of the magistrates took fearful steps away from Rogue, tightening their grips on their weapons. She shrugged as if she didn't care that they had seen through

her deception. “So, you know who I am. Now, what do you think you’re going to do about it?”

“Same as we’d do with any other freak,” said the leader. Then, raising his voice, he barked out the command: “Fire at will!”

Ororo Munroe stirred in her sleep. She was distantly aware that she was being held fast by something cold and hard, which encircled her midriff and trapped her wrists and ankles. Part of her knew that she ought to wake up, but she was plunging back into warm darkness before she could even make the effort. She surfaced amid the bright colors and disconnected recollections of dreams, discomfited that her mind’s eye had chosen to replay the details of her recent defeat to her.

Storm relived the moment when Magneto had entered the Hellfire Club’s ballroom, when she had been surrounded by four formidable foes. Again, she summoned a lightning strike—and again, she aimed it not at Magneto or even at Shaw but at her teammate, Phoenix. She delivered as mild a shock as she dared: she didn’t want to hurt her dear friend, but she had to get through to her, to penetrate Lady Mastermind’s illusions. Shaken back to reality, Phoenix took in the situation and broadcast a telepathic wakeup call to Cyclops and the Beast.

By then, however, it was already too late for Storm.

If only she could have reacted more swiftly, if she had not let her weakness cloud her mind, if she had come to her senses a moment earlier. If she had had that extra moment to think, to develop a more effective stratagem. But then, what could she have done?

Again, Magneto manipulated the iron in Storm’s blood, the pain no less intense for the knowledge that it was only an echo of what she had truly suffered. He could have torn her apart, he could have stopped her heart, but he contented himself with rendering her helpless. As she hit the floor, fighting unconsciousness, she saw her teammates

rushing to the attack again, knowing—even more certainly than she had known the first time—that their efforts were in vain. Lady Mastermind fell first, doubtless the loser of a psychic struggle with Phoenix—but, while Jean was thus distracted, Shaw felled her with one punch. And then, the Beast’s eyes rolled back into his head and his legs buckled beneath him, and Storm knew that Tessa had shut down his mind.

Cyclops took out the telepath with one shot from his eyes, and turned to Magneto—but his optic blasts were absorbed by his enemy’s magnetic force field. Then, Magneto cut off the X-Man’s connection to gravity itself, and he hurtled into the ceiling with an impact that sent spider-web cracks crazing across the white plaster.

That was when Storm’s eyes had closed at last, and where the dream now thankfully ended too. All she remembered after that was the feeling of something covering her nose and mouth, and the sweet smell of chloroform. The part of her that knew she had to wake was screaming now as it struggled impotently in the depths of her psyche.

But it too faded as the blissful darkness enveloped her once more.

The magistrates’ automatic rifles spat a hail of bullets, and Rogue leapt into action. The shells were armor-piercing: they still bounced off her near-invulnerable skin, but they hurt like hell. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she grabbed the leader’s gun and bent the barrel back on itself so that it pointed at him. If she had expected him to be startled by this display of strength, however, then she was disappointed. He reacted instantaneously, discarding the weapon to aim an ineffectual punch at Rogue’s chin. She tried to knock him away from her, but he ducked beneath her arm and took hold of her jogger top, using her weight and momentum against her and hurling her to the ground. She berated herself inwardly for not realizing that he would

be combat trained and well used to fighting foes with special powers.

Determined not to make the same mistake again, she ploughed into the magistrates like a bowling ball, and scattered them. As two fell, two more jumped onto her back, but she twisted around and dislodged them, knocking one out with a punishing blow. The other jammed a gun barrel into her face and yelled out: "Chew on this, you freak!"

Recognizing the voice of the woman who had identified her, Rogue batted the rifle out of her hands and cracked her mask with a punch. "That's for the remark about my hair!" she quipped. She was actually beginning to enjoy herself. After a hard night, an easy fight like this was a good way to blow the cobwebs out of her brain. And she couldn't think of any more deserving targets for her fists than this bunch of xenophobes.

But then, a new noise reached her ears: a whine, increasing in pitch as it became louder. And she realized too late that one of her foes was holding a blaster weapon, almost the size of a small cannon. He was charging it for use, and the whining reached an ear-splitting climax before cutting out abruptly. Quickly, Rogue grabbed another of the magistrates and swung him around in front of her. His comrade fired anyway.

There was an explosion, but no sound and no pain, just a split-second of blackness and a sensation of disconnectedness from the world. Then, Rogue was surrounded by fire-but, for a moment, she thought she could fly through it, attack the magistrate before he could recharge his blaster again. Except that, when she tried to move her legs, she couldn't. And then she realized that she was falling, the ground rushing toward her in slow motion, and she tried to put out her hands to catch herself but she couldn't move her arms either.

And then she was down, her body twitching involuntarily but otherwise paralyzed, and she was screaming inside,

desperately trying to work out what they had done to her.

Another toecap in her ribs. She was rolled over onto her back, staring up helplessly, oddly embarrassed as she felt a trickle of drool brimming over her bottom lip and could do nothing about it. Her human shield, she saw, had fallen too, and two of the other magistrates were dragging him away from her, making him comfortable. She was looking down the lead magistrate's rifle again, and she couldn't even engage her larynx to say a word.

He flipped up his mask to let Rogue see her executioner. He was surprisingly young, but his thin face was hard beyond its years. His brown hair was long and lank, and his chin sported a two-day growth of stubble. His eyes were wide and fanatical, his nostrils flaring as he grinned at his helpless victim in triumph. "What's up, genejoke?" he sneered. "Didn't think a few human beings were any match for you, huh? Well, surprise! We learned a few things in the service. We got ways of dealing with uppity freaks like you!" He dealt a vicious kick to Rogue's side, but it hurt a lot less than his inflammatory words. Burning with indignation, she tried to reach up to him, but she was still frustratingly helpless.

Another shape loomed over her: the female magistrate again. "Neural paralyzer, honey," she explained. "We just knocked out the connections between your nerve endings and your brain. The effect's only temporary, like-but for the next couple of minutes, you won't be able to move a muscle, so don't waste your breath trying."

"And that's plenty of time," said the leader, with a sadistic smirk as he worked the breach of his rifle and lowered its muzzle to hover an inch above Rogue's face, "to see if our bullets bounce off your eyes like they do the rest of you."

Rogue tried to say something, to stall him, but the only sound to emerge from her throat was an impotent mewl.

She couldn't even close her eyes. They were beginning to water.

The leader let her sweat for a few more seconds, evidently enjoying his power over her. Then he withdrew the gun. "Unless," he said, "you tell us what we want to know."

"Think about it," said the woman. "You should recover your power of speech in a minute."

"Something else to think about," said the man. "They say that repeated shots from the neuralyzer can screw up your nervous system for good. I wouldn't try to escape if I was you."

"Thought... you were ... gonna kill me ... anyway," said Rogue. At least, that was what she tried to say—but her jaw wouldn't move, her tongue lolled in her mouth and the words came out without consonants.

"What do the X-Men want in Genosha?"

Rogue's curt answer was as indistinct as her last attempt at speech, but her forceful tone got the message across nonetheless.

The magistrates' leader scowled and hefted his rifle again. "We can make this quick," he spat, "or we can make it very, very painful for you."

With an effort, Rogue managed to lower her eyelids at last. She breathed in deeply, feeling control of her muscles slowly returning to her. She rolled her numb tongue around her mouth. Then, hearing the whine of the recharging neuralyzer, she opened her eyes again and saw that two more magistrates had gathered around her, their knuckles white on the grips of their respective weapons as they waited for her to make her move. She flexed a hand experimentally; it responded to her command, but sluggishly. If she made a break for it now, she would be gunned down before she could take two steps.

"OK," she sighed indistinctly, "I'll tell you why we're here."

“Did Magneto send for you?” asked the woman.

Rogue tried to shake her head, but the effort was too much for her. She managed a weak laugh instead. “The X-Men are no friends of Magneto.”

“You’re mutants, like he is!” snapped the leader in an accusing tone.

“So? You’re a human; does that mean you support Adolf Hitler’s policies?”

“You were one of the ones who freed the mutants,” said the woman. “You started all this!”

“But it wasn’t our idea to put Magneto in charge of your country, sugar. That was the good ladies and gentlemen of the United Nations—your own kind—and believe me, we’re just as unhappy with that development as you are.”

“Magneto has talked about the X-Men as enemies,” offered one of the other magistrates in an uncertain tone.

“So, we’re expected to believe that this gene freak is on our side?” sneered the leader.

“I’m sure you’ll believe whatever suits you best,” snarled Rogue.

“That’s how bigots operate, isn’t it?” The leader’s eyes flared, and he brandished his rifle as if he were about to strike her with its butt. Quickly, Rogue added: “But if you don’t want the mutants getting the upper hand in Genosha, you’ll at least listen to me before you make up your mind.”

She was feeling better now, and she hauled herself into a sitting position. Nobody made a move to stop her. She took a moment to steel herself for what she had to do, for what she had been unable to do before. Then, in a low, throaty voice, she told them: “Magneto has found a cure to the Legacy Virus. We’ve come here to take it off him.” A murmur of disbelief and fear rippled through the magistrates. “If this is a trick-” began the leader.

“It’s no trick!” snapped Rogue, letting out some of her anger. “And the way I see it, the Legacy epidemic here is the one thing that stops the mutants from wiping out the likes of

you for good and all. If I were you, I'd be getting very, very worried about now."

"So, why are you involved?" asked the leader. "What's in it for you?"

"Good question," said Rogue with feeling. "Moments like this, I'm tempted to just head for home and leave you to slug it out. But that's not how the X-Men operate—and believe it or not, we don't like the idea of Magneto heading up an army of perfectly healthy mutants any more than you do." She tried not to think about what Nightcrawler had said back at the mansion: *Would you rather see those mutants die?* She was loath to think that she could have any goal in common with her captors, but her survival depended upon convincing them of it.

"What do you think?" the magistrate leader muttered to the others out of the corner of his mouth, as if that would prevent her from overhearing him.

"It would make sense of the rumors we've been hearing out of Hammer Bay."

"There are always rumors. No one ever knows Magneto's plans for sure. He's a madman."

"As far as I'm concerned, the Legacy Virus is a punishment from God. I don't see how those genejokes *could* have found a cure for it." "But what if they have? What about our own people?"

The leader nodded thoughtfully and turned back to Rogue, "We've had a few humans go down with Legacy too."

"Filthy mutant freaks," spat one of the other men, "spreading their infection to us."

"We'll come to the Citadel with you," decided the leader. "We'll help you find this cure on condition that you leave it in our hands." A cruel smile pulled at his mouth as he thought about the possibilities. "We'd soon have those genejokes dancing to our tune."

“Uh-uh.” Rogue shook her head vehemently. “This is strictly a solo flight.”

Scowling, the leader clicked his fingers in the direction of the magistrate with the neuralyzer. The weapon was brought up to cover the X-Man again. “I think you’re forgetting who’s got the upper hand here!”

“You’re right,” said Rogue, struggling to her feet. She was still weak, but at least her muscles were working now.

“You’re in control. So, it’s time to decide. I’m leaving now. Shoot me in the back; I can’t stop you. But if you kill me, Magneto wins. You’ll wake up tomorrow or the day after to find your enemies ten times stronger than they were today. Leave me to get on with my business, on the other hand, and you can go back to fighting your petty little war as if none of this ever happened. You won’t see me again. Your choice.”

Her fierce tone had riveted the magistrates to the spot. Even so, as she pivoted on her heel and limped away from them, she didn’t know how they would react. She fancied she could feel a prickling sensation in her back where the sights of the neuralyzer were trained on her.

She was relieved, then, when, having succumbed to the urge to look back over her shoulder, she saw that the magistrates were gone. But they had left her with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach and a flush of shame in her cheeks. She had hated having to deal with them, to pander to their prejudice, and every word had left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She couldn’t help but feel that, if the X-Men were successful in their mission, then it would be at the expense of every poor, persecuted mutate in this country.

Raul Jarrett pressed his face up against the ventilation grille, shocked by what he could see in the room beyond it. He was looking down at a lump of twisted metal: it looked like a modern art sculpture, but for the fact that it held four sleeping figures in a variety of poses in its inanimate grasp.

Jarrett didn't recognize any of them, but their garish costumes reminded him of talk he had heard of the X-Men, staunch enemies of Genosha. The "sculpture," of course, must have been shaped around them by the Savior.

Sitting with her back to the prisoners, engrossed in a well-thumbed paperback novel, was Miranda. Jarrett had shared a cabin with her on the flight from Genosha to Sydney, but they had not talked. He had spent the journey in a state of nervous anticipation, aware of the brooding presence of the Savior and wishing that Nurse Jenny could have been with him. And the girl, he had come to understand, was deaf and mute. She was about sixteen years old, her blonde hair was beginning to grow out again, and she wore a pink skinsuit with a swirling black pattern on its front. He didn't know what her special abilities were. He resisted the urge to attract her attention with a wave—the Savior himself had instructed him to tell nobody, friend or foe, about his task—and crawled on.

The air-conditioning ducts of the Hellfire Club building were narrow; too narrow for most people. That was why Jarrett had been picked for this mission. By elongating his body, he could slither down the confining tunnels like a snake. With a little concentration, and some pain, he could even squeeze himself through the grilles that blocked his path at irregular intervals. He felt honored to have been chosen, that Magneto himself considered his humble skills useful. At the same time, however, he was scared. He thought about the four figures held in the metal sculpture. Might that be his future if he disappointed the Savior?

He followed his directions, and came to the grille that led to his target destination: the suite of rooms currently occupied by Sebastian Shaw. He poked a fingertip through the metal latticework and, taking a deep breath, compacted the rest of his finger, then his hand, then his arm, to follow it. His body oozed into Shaw's bedroom like silly putty rolled long and thin, pooling back into its humanoid form as it

gathered on the floor. Jarrett was left feeling as if he had stretched his bones to breaking point. He lay on the carpet for a full minute, fighting back tears as he recovered from his ordeal, as his muscles settled gratefully back into their accustomed positions. Outside, the Australian morning was hot-but in here, the shades were drawn, and Raul Jarrett enjoyed the cool touch of the darkness.

It was dark in the outer room of the suite too, but by the time he had cautiously crossed the threshold, his eyes had adjusted. He glanced at the large wooden desk, the high-backed chair behind it turned away from him and toward the window. To his disappointment, the desktop was empty but for a penholder—but his eyes alighted upon a wooden two-drawer filing cabinet, which stood against the wall beside it. Quickly, Jarrett stole across the room and stooped in front of the cabinet, his eyes forever flicking toward the closed door of the office. The Savior had told him that, above all else, he must not be discovered in here.

The cabinet was locked, but Jarrett knew how to shape his forefinger around the tumblers and trip them. His trembling hands made the simple task more difficult-but still, the lock soon yielded to his manipulations. He pulled open the top drawer eagerly to find a small stack of papers therein, divided by manila folders. The bottom drawer was empty.

He was reaching for the topmost folder when something—some sixth sense that made the hairs on the back of his neck tingle—told him that he wasn't alone. Whirling around, he fell from his crouching position with a gasp as he met the burning gaze of the Black King.

Shaw was sitting in the high-backed chair, his face cast into shadow. He must have been there all along, not six feet away from where Jarrett now sprawled, his back against the incriminatingly open cabinet. He must have turned the chair around and watched in silence as the mutate violated his

security. Jarrett tried to say something, but there was nothing he *could* say. He let out a defeated whine instead.

“Mr. Jarrett, is it not?” Somehow, the fact that Shaw knew his name made him even more uncomfortable. He and Miranda had been standing at their ruler’s heels when Shaw had greeted Magneto at his private airfield, but they had not been introduced. Magneto had acted as if they weren’t even present. Clearly, though, they had not escaped the Black King’s attention. Jarrett shivered with the illogical feeling that Shaw knew everything about him. “And may I assume that this intrusion was instigated by your master, my so-called ally?”

Gathering his wits, Jarrett shook his head and stammered: “N-no, sir.”

“Please do not lie to me,” said Shaw evenly. “You will only force me to hurt you, and I do not think either of us wants that.”

“I... I was just... the Savior instructed me to. . . .”

Shaw silenced the mutate with a raised hand. “You do not have to explain to me. Magneto does not trust me any more than I trust him. I would be surprised if it were not so. That is why I allowed him to believe that I was no longer in the building: to see what he would do. He has sent you to search for evidence of perfidy in my absence, yes?”

Jarrett swallowed and nodded. Shaw’s features softened a little in approval of his belated honesty. “Fate has not been kind to you, has it, Mr. Jarrett? To have swapped the oppression of one regime for another. ...”

“M-Magneto is the Savior of the mutates,” he objected automatically.

“Then how is it that you are still a slave?” asked Shaw harshly.

“No! I... I mean, I. . . .”

“No? So, you will happily go to your Savior now and inform him of your failure?”

Jarrett bowed his head, his cheeks coloring. "If I must," he mumbled.

"And you do not fear what he will do to you?" Jarrett didn't speak, but he didn't doubt that the Black King already knew the answer to his question. "Look at you," said Shaw with contempt. "How old are you, Mr. Jarrett? Twenty-five? Thirty? A grown man, and yet you act like a child. You call another man your master; you crave his approval, and you are terrified of his wrath. You have no control over your own life. You are pathetic!"

Jarrett didn't-couldn't-disagree with him. He cringed as Shaw stood suddenly, expecting a blow to come at last. But Shaw just clasped his hands behind his back and walked slowly toward his bedroom. "I am tired," he said languidly. "You are welcome to search my office while I rest, but you will find nothing. And Mr. Jarrett?" He had halted in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder with an unfathomable glint in his eye. "I think this unfortunate encounter should remain our secret, don't you?"

Jarrett nodded eagerly, his heart overflowing with relief and gratitude even as his brain tried to work out the Black King's motive for sparing him.

He conducted a thorough search of the office, awkward as it made him feel, always aware of the sound of Shaw's measured breathing from the next room. He looked through every one of the files in the cabinet, and even booted up the laptop that he found in a desk drawer and searched for text documents on its hard drive. Jarrett had never used a computer before, but Magneto himself had taken him to one side on the plane and taught him what he needed to know. He had absorbed the lesson, speaking only when he had had to and stumbling over his words when he did. For the rest of the flight—and for most of last night, in his simple quarters elsewhere in the Hellfire Club building—he had pored over the scrap of paper on which he had noted down his instructions, memorizing them, not knowing why the

Savior wished him to acquire this new skill but determined not to let him down.

He hovered in the doorway to the bedroom for a long moment Shaw was lying on his back on the bed, fully clothed in his velvet costume, a blackout mask over his eyes. His hands were clasped across his chest, which rose and fell rhythmically, but Jarrett couldn't quite bring himself to believe that he was asleep.

He had been told to search both rooms of the suite, but he was afraid. Anyway, he insisted to himself, he was unlikely to find anything in the bedroom, and even less so to leave it alive if he did. But what if Magneto—the Savior, his master—asked him outright if he had followed his orders? Could Jarrett lie to him? He had no choice, he realized. He already knew that he couldn't risk revealing the whole truth to him; what did one more detail matter?

He crept across the room as quietly as he could, and reached toward the ventilation duct. Then, he started at the unexpected sound of Shaw's voice behind him. "You may as well leave by the door, Mr. Jarrett," he rumbled, without moving. "I dismissed my sentries shortly after you entered the air-conditioning system."

Raul Jarrett left the Black King's suite as quickly as his legs would take him.

The sun had risen fully now, and Rogue was beginning to feel smothered by Genosha's oppressive morning heat. She sat on the gentle slope of a grassy hill on the outskirts of Hammer Bay as she considered her next move, grateful for every stray breeze that came her way. Up close like this, the capital looked more squalid than ever. Every crumbling wall, every letter of obscene graffiti, every pile of rubble or scorch mark was exposed by the uncaring daylight. But there was life among the wreckage too: she could make out distant figures, erecting scaffolding around the most precarious buildings and removing refuse from the streets.

The rebuilding work had begun here, as Magneto had promised.

Rogue had hoped that the other X-Men would find her. She had seen and heard nothing of them since the mutate attack in the forest. Perhaps they hadn't escaped, or perhaps they had simply entered Hammer Bay from another direction. More than once, she had taken out her concealed communicator and looked at it. It was sturdy, and it still worked despite the punishment that had been meted out to it. But she herself had decreed that radio silence should be maintained if possible. She couldn't risk having her position triangulated-or giving away her presence in Genosha if a comm-set had fallen into the wrong hands.

Rogue knew what she had to do now, whether she liked it or not. The X-Men had agreed when they had formulated their plans. She had to assume that Wolverine, Nightcrawler and Iceman had been killed or captured. The effects of the neuralyzer had worn off long ago, and she was only wasting time by waiting here, nursing a forlorn hope. She had to go on.

She had to penetrate Magneto's command center alone.

CHAPTER 7

THE RISING sun had brought no light to the mutates' underground home. However, at about eight o'clock, somebody had _ turned on the rest of the bulbs that were threaded through the cellars. Many of the mutates had stayed in bed anyway; others had risen and were reading old magazines or eating joylessly or sitting in corners with miserable expressions. A few-a pitiful few-had left to attend training schemes organized by the new government. A significant proportion of the remainder had gathered around the flickering screen of a battered television set, on which a black and white World War II movie was playing. The announcer had introduced it as "a reminder of what must never be allowed to happen again." There was some conversation, but it was muted. These people were going through the motions of life, taking no pleasure from it.

Kurt had hoped to leave here before now, but Wolverine was still asleep. When he had visited him, he had been tossing and turning and there had been beads of sweat on his forehead. Kurt had prayed that another few hours in bed might allow his teammate's body to do its work, or the fever to bum itself out, but this seemed increasingly unlikely.

He ought to have gone on alone, but how could he leave his best friend here? He would give it a little longer, he decided. He would talk to the mutates, find out more about what he could expect to find when he reached Hammer Bay.

He followed the most persistent voices to what appeared to be the final cellar in the row. Peering through the hole in the brick wall that led to it, he saw that the room was lit not by electricity but by aromatic, multicolored candles. Chairs had been set out in rows around a central aisle, which stretched from the entrance to a table draped in white cloth. Atop the table was a small golden sculpture, hexagonal with

angular, stylized wings rising from each side of it. It took Kurt a few seconds to remember where he had seen the design before: a two-dimensional version of it adorned Magneto's helmet.

A short queue of people straggled down the aisle. In front of the table, a mutate knelt with his head bowed and a plate held out in front of him. Kurt suppressed a shiver at the sight of the tall, sunkeneyed Priest, his bald head glimmering in the flickering light as he stepped forward and placed one large hand on the mutate's head. The mutate mumbled a prayer, which Kurt couldn't hear, and the Priest reached behind the table and produced a thick slice of bread. He placed it on the plate, and the suppliant rose, genuflected and hurried away. The next person in line took his place.

Kurt stepped back from the hole to allow the mutate to pass him. He had only just realized how hungry he was, but he had no intention of joining the queue, of mouthing blasphemous prayers to an evil man-and a sworn enemy, at that—for his breakfast.

He followed the mutate to a corner in which a long table and some chairs had been set out, and where several people were eating in silence. He was pleased to see tin jugs of water and chipped mugs on the table, and he took a seat and drank gratefully.

He found himself sitting opposite a woman in her mid-thirties, with a round, ruddy face and prematurely gray hair, who was nurturing a baby. It was a pleasant surprise. Kurt had seen few youngsters in the cellars. He had deduced that, with no geneengineer to detect and activate the latent mutant genes of the population, no new mutates were being created. And one of the crueler functions of the skinsuits was to prevent the existing ones from reproducing. Even before the Legacy epidemic, their race had been dying out. This woman had obviously rid herself of her suit when she had had the chance. He allowed himself a grin at the

thought that, even in this subterranean gloom, life had found a way to flourish.

The woman saw his eyes upon her, and she smiled back at him.

"He's a beautiful baby," said Kurt. "What's he called?"

"Magnus," said the woman. "After our Savior."

The grin faded from Kurt's lips.

"I could feel His presence the day I knew that Magnus was growing inside me." The woman's eyes darkened. "His father was killed, you see-ambushed on his way to his new job at the refinery. He was helping to rebuild our country, but the humans wouldn't allow him even that. But, by Magneto's grace, a part of Michael lives on. Our

Savior will let no harm come to this one." She kissed her baby softly on his forehead.

"So long as we prove ourselves worthy," muttered a mutate beside Kurt, without looking up.

"Have youii-have any of you-ever seen Magneto?" Kurt realized that he was starting along a dangerous path, but he couldn't help himself.

The woman shook her head. "Only on our television. But He sees us, and He speaks to us. He promises our people a better world." Kurt realized, with a sudden pang, that the mutates weren't used to being shown any consideration, to being acknowledged at all.

"And we've seen His works," added the man next to Kurt.

"He healed me when I tore my hide," offered a woman from further down the table. Her mutation was more visible than most: her skin was gray and wrinkled, and a horn grew out of the center of her face. She looked like a baby rhinoceros given humanoid form.

Kurt took a second to process that information. "Through the Priest, you mean?" The rhinoceros woman nodded, looking at him as if it should have been obvious. He began to wish that he hadn't drawn so much attention to himself. A few seconds ago, each of the diners had occupied his or her

own private world; now, all eyes were focussed upon him, the stranger asking odd questions about their deity. He cleared his throat self-consciously, and said: "We didn't have religious leaders back in Carrion Cove. How do you know... I mean, how does somebody get to become a priest?"

"Our Priest was chosen," said the woman with the baby.

"He channels the blessed force of magnetism."

"The Savior uses him as a conduit for his great powers."

Kurt frowned. "Didn't he have those abilities before Magneto came to Genosha?"

The mutates looked at him blankly, and Kurt wondered if it was wise to press the point. As it transpired, however, the choice was taken out of his hands. He heard a commotion from somewhere behind him. Voices were raised in anger, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. Somebody cried out in pain, and the mutates at the table exchanged fearful glances.

It said something of the life that Kurt Wagner had lived that he hesitated before teleporting, asking himself what the reaction of those around him would be. He had to remind himself that everybody here had abilities like his own. Not one of them had commented on, or even looked twice at, his unusual features, although most of them could have passed for human themselves. Having rarely enjoyed such unquestioning acceptance, he felt a little ashamed that he had been so suspicious of the mutates' motives in return.

But then, he materialized in the central cellar, and everything changed again.

As he had guessed, the noises had come from here. Only this cellar, and the one at the far end of the row away from the chapel, afforded access to street level: the other exits had been barricaded from this side. Two skinsuited mutates—a man and a woman, neither of whom Nightcrawler recognized—were being manhandled up the rickety steps by a much larger group. They weren't being treated gently. The

man screamed as one of his attackers poked a finger into his ribs and triggered a visible discharge of energy. The woman shrank to a fraction of her original size, and there was a dangerous scramble to recapture her.

More mutants were pushing up the staircase from below, jeering and shouting insults. From across the cellar, others hurled cups and plates, whatever they could get their hands on. Kurt was horrified at the change that had come over these once placid people. He picked out one phrase amid the babble: "We don't want your kind here!"

He intercepted a woman as she brandished a chair, placing restraining hands on her shoulders. "What's going on here?" he cried. "They're our kind-they're mutants!"

"They can't come in here!" she screamed in his face. "They're unclean! Unclean!"

The door was slammed and bolted behind the would-be refugees, to a tangible outpouring of relief. The mutants were still agitated, chattering in loud voices, drowning each other out, and suddenly Nightcrawler felt very lonely in the middle of the crowd.

He wanted to ask the woman what she had meant by "unclean"-but he was dreadfully afraid that he knew the answer already.

Iceman had woken to electrical lighting too-but in his case, it was stark, white and clinical, bleeding through the doorway of his dormitory. He had no way of telling the time, but he remembered staying awake until past dawn. The other beds were empty, and he suspected that most of the morning had passed.

He turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling, his brain picking up from where it had left off when exhaustion had claimed him at last, pondering his situation until it hurt.

His so-called rescuers had taken him to a tall building on the outskirts of their village. From the outside, it looked like just another abandoned warehouse. As Bobby had passed

through its doors, however, he had felt the faint hum of machinery beneath his feet.

He had been taken through an airlock into an environment that was totally at odds with the world outside. A main atrium was packed from floor to high ceiling with consoles and computer banks at all levels, a system of ladders providing access to numerous raised workstations. Monitors relayed the output of hidden cameras positioned around the village, although Hendrickson had explained that many of these had been discovered and destroyed. Passages and staircases led off to personal quarters and who-knew-what else.

Of course, this had been a magistrates' base: one of many secreted around the country to help keep Genosha's precious peace. Its deceptive exterior had masked its function, and kept it hidden when riots had swept through the streets a few feet away.

"The magistrates took as much equipment as they could when they evacuated," Hendrickson had explained, "but we've salvaged guns and combat suits and a few other useful items. The mutants may have their freakish powers, but we don't have to be helpless against them."

Bobby had had no intention of making small talk. After a few less than subtle yawns, he had been shown to a spare bunk, in which he had lain, feigning sleep and listening to the snores of the people around him, feeling surrounded. Eventually, when he had heard no sound from outside the room for over half an hour, he had got up, dressed hurriedly and slipped away.

The base had been built whole inside the warehouse: solid steel walls lay between Iceman and the boarded-up windows he had seen from the outside. He didn't dare look too hard for another way out, and so he had eventually found himself back in the atrium. He had been disappointed, if not surprised, to find people at four of the workstations, and two sentries at the airlock door. He had not recognized

any of them-the watch shift must have changed-but they had known who he was. He had claimed to be feeling restless, and they hadn't seemed to mind him pacing the room and inspecting its contents.

The sentries held rifles, and heavy bolts were drawn across the white, circular door itself. Bobby's powers had returned to him, but he hadn't been sure how much good they would do him. He could have taken out the guards, but the door would have cost him precious time and he didn't know what resources the people at the workstations had. More hi-tech weapons like their sonic sphere, perhaps? Even if he could have escaped, the alarm would have been raised and the humans would surely have come after him. They wouldn't have let a 'genejoke' expose their presence here.

Bobby had hovered in the atrium for some time, looking and waiting for anything that might give him an advantage. Perhaps one of the guards would take a rest break? Perhaps something would happen to send all the watchmen scurrying outside again? But the night had dragged on uneventfully, and he had only become more tired. He had surrendered at last, consoling himself with the thought that he might get a better opportunity tomorrow when he was refreshed.

His hopes were confounded, however, as he returned to the atrium to find it buzzing with activity. There had to be at least forty people present, rushing this way and that, getting under each others' feet. Two women had dismantled a blaster weapon of some sort; a pair of legs protruded from beneath one of the workstations; a crudely drawn map had been tacked to the wall, and a small group had gathered around it. Hendrickson was moving from monitor to monitor, taking reports and nodding to himself. Bobby glanced longingly at the door, but it was more out of reach than ever. He stood alone and tried to work out his next move, until a figure emerged from the confusion and approached him.

He recognized the young woman called Debs from last night. What he hadn't realized then, in the darkness, was how attractive she was. Her heart-shaped face was framed by buoyant brown-black hair shaped into a bob, and her eyes were blue and friendly. Her expression was open and guileless-deceptively so, Bobby felt sure.

"Morning," she said cheerfully. "Had any breakfast yet?" Bobby hadn't, and he couldn't deny that he was hungry. Debs offered to take him to the mess. "We don't have much, I'm afraid," she confided, "but I'm sure we can find you a tin of something."

The square tables and benches in the mess were empty, but Debs stayed with Bobby as he heated up baked beans on an electric hob in the kitchen alcove. To his discomfort, she kept asking questions. He answered with as few words as possible, careful not to betray his contempt for everything she stood for, hoping that she would get the hint and leave him alone. Lying awkwardly, he claimed to have worked as a foreman at the mines outside Hammer Bay until he was driven out of his home by mutates. He had meant to say "genejokes," but he hadn't been able to spit out the insult. He felt as if he were being tested, like his every word was subject to the utmost scrutiny.

"No wonder you wanted out," said Debs, spooning powdered milk into two cups of instant coffee. "Magneto talks a lot about mutant rights, but what about basic human rights? That's what I want to know."

"The mutates had it bad for a long time," said Bobby. It was all he could do to keep his tone civil. "They were treated like slaves."

He regretted the words as soon as he had spoken them. He expected Debs to issue a sharp retort, to denounce him as a traitor to his kind, to summon her colleagues. Instead, she said: "I know. But does that mean we all deserve to have to live like this?"

"Mr. Wagner."

Something about the Priest's baritone voice gave Nightcrawler an unnatural chill. He turned, and looked up into the tall man's intense blue eyes. The Priest's thin lips were set into a grim line. Crooking a long finger to indicate that the X-Man should follow him, he strode away, apparently confident of his obedience. Kurt's first thought was that the Priest had been told about his conversation at breakfast, that his suspicions had been aroused. With a quick glance back at the sleeping Wolverine, he crossed his fingers behind his back and followed. He felt even colder as he was led into the chapel area, trying to avert his eyes from the winged sculpture atop the makeshift altar.

The Priest indicated that he should take a seat at the front of the room. He remained standing himself so that he now towered over Kurt, glaring down at him hawk-like from behind his protruding nose. "Are you not a religious man, Mr. Wagner? Do you not believe?"

Kurt started. "As it happens, my friend, my faith is the most important thing in my life."

The Priest raised an eyebrow. "And yet, we did not see you at prayer this morning."

Kurt swallowed hard. He wanted to tell this man, this false prophet, exactly what he thought of him. As far as he could see, the Priest had taken advantage of the mutants' vulnerability, inducting them into his false church when they had been confused and disoriented. He had used their need to believe in a higher power to manipulate them, to set himself up above them. But his power over them was undeniable, and Kurt couldn't challenge it; not while Wolverine still needed his bed here. "At Carrion Cove," he said instead, "our prayers were a private matter, conducted away from the ears of our oppressors."

The Priest held his gaze for a long, nerve-racking moment before he accepted his story with a solemn nod. "We are proud of our faith here, Mr. Wagner, and we will not be persecuted for it. We gather again at six-thirty to give

thanks to our Lord and pray for a better day tomorrow. We can expect to see you there?" His words had the inflection of a question but the tone of an instruction.

Kurt's only answer was a tight smile, but fortunately this appeared to suffice. With any luck, he and Logan would be long gone before the service began. He felt bad enough that he was effectively denying his own God, if not explicitly then at least by omission. He couldn't have joined in a prayer to Magneto, he just couldn't: the words would have choked him.

The Priest pulled back a chair and sat beside him, now adopting an almost conspiratorial manner. "I visited the infirmary again earlier. The condition of your travelling companion is, I fear, not improving. He may need more help than we can give him."

"I thought the power of Magneto flowed through you," said Kurt brazenly.

The Priest's eyes flashed. "But some are not deemed worthy to receive it."

"Logan is a good man!" the X-Man insisted, containing his anger.

"As you claim to be yourself—and yet you have lied to us."

Kurt narrowed his eyes and tried not to show how worried he was. "How so?"

"You claimed your friend was injured by humans. His wound, however, could only have been inflicted by an animal-or by a man with the characteristics of one."

Kurt nodded and sighed. "We were attacked by mutants," he admitted.

"Where?" asked the Priest sharply.

He thought quickly. "I don't know the name of the village. A few miles to the east of here. They looked like a band of scavengers. They thought we were stealing their food. We couldn't reason with them. We ran."

The Priest shook his head sadly. "It pains me to hear of brother mutates living in such conditions. I can only pray to our Savior that he will end their troubles soon..." Then his expression hardened. "This does not explain why you deceived us!"

"We'd been on the run for days. We didn't know who we could trust."

The Priest's eyes bore into Kurt. It seemed that, with each lie, he became more reluctant to believe the outsider. But he hadn't been able to trip him up. Yet. "Your friend does not wear a skinsuit," he observed, casting his eye slowly up and down Kurt's holographic costume as if he could see it for the illusion it was.

"He had the bonding process reversed as soon as he was able."

"A brave decision. I understand the operation is not without its risks."

"Logan is a brave man, and proud. He refused to wear the clothes of a slave for any longer than he had to."

"And with what abilities has Mr. Logan been blessed?" "Enhanced senses—and he can extend claws from the backs of his hands."

"Claws—like those of the mutate who wounded him."

Kurt nodded. He didn't know where this was going, but he had his suspicions.

"Only I am beginning to fear that his attacker did more than simply wound him," said the Priest. "He is feverish."

"He may have blood poisoning—or his wound may have become infected."

"And there is a rattle in his chest."

"As I said, we have been on the run for days. We have hardly slept. It is a miracle that we have not both come down with colds." "Hmm." The Priest cradled his chin in one large hand, and nodded thoughtfully to himself. Then, finally, he got to his feet and smoothed down his white robes. Kurt took this as a cue to stand too; he was anxious

to get out of here. "I will pray for your friend," promised the Priest. "I trust you will do the same. Our Lord may yet choose to bestow His favor upon him."

He turned away, then, and Kurt sensed that the audience was over. He scurried back down the aisle, trying not to make his haste too evident. He was brought up short by the Priest's booming voice behind him. "Until this evening, then, Mr. Wagner."

Kurt didn't answer. He forced himself to start walking again, although he could almost feel the Priest's hawk eyes burning into his back.

It was with some relief that he finally put a cellar wall between himself and his inquisitor. The sensation didn't last, however: he had too much else to worry about.

He had guessed the reason for the Priest's questions as soon as he had asked about Wolverine's abilities. He had been looking for evidence to support what he suspected. It hadn't been hard for Kurt to deduce as much, given that he was beginning to share the same awful suspicion himself. That was why he had not mentioned Logan's healing factor. He hadn't wanted the Priest to know that, whatever was wrong with his friend, it was having a direct effect upon his mutant gene. He hadn't wanted him to know just how serious the situation was. He thought he had succeeded in throwing him off the scent for now, but he knew that he had gained only a temporary respite.

And he knew that, if his fears about Wolverine's condition proved well grounded, then the reaction of the Priest would be the least of his problems.

"So, what's all the activity about?" asked Bobby, pushing his tin plate away from him. He felt much better with hot food inside him, and he had been talking to Debs for long enough to feel that he could slip a few important questions into the conversation. It was time he found out more about what was going on around him, started working on an escape plan.

Debs sat across the wooden table from him, sipping her coffee. "Preparations. We found a nest of mutates in the village a few days ago. Hendrickson wants to take it out-tonight."

Bobby's stomach sank, and he almost wished he hadn't asked. His distaste must have shown, because Debs leaned forward and said: "You don't seem too happy about that."

Fumblingly, he tried to retrieve the situation. "I don't see how it's going to solve anything." For good measure, he added: "Haven't we lived through enough violence?"

Debs accepted that with a shrug. "Sometimes, we don't have a choice."

"You could stop," he said pointedly.

She shook her head. "You don't understand. We've lost four people to these particular mutates in the past week. I don't like it any more than you do, but it's kill or be killed!"

"That's what your friend said last night," said Bobby, staring morosely into his cup.

"She was right. You've seen it for yourself, Bobby. You don't think those GUMPs were trying to take you alive, do you? They'd already turned you back from the border, but they still came after you. They wanted blood!" That wasn't entirely true, but Bobby couldn't argue the point without giving himself away. "And they're just the acceptable face of Magneto's army: at least he keeps them under some measure of control. The ones you really have to watch out for are the terrorists and the street gangs, the ones who harbor a grudge against all humans. They'd see us all dead just because our genes are a little different to theirs!"

Bobby stared at her, speechless. He had heard that bitter sentiment expressed many times in his life, but never by a non-mutant.

Debs let out a weary sigh. "I suppose I was stupid. I should have run like all my friends did when the United Nations sold us out to Magneto. But Genosha is my home, damn it. I'd sat tight through the civil war and I was just

beginning to feel comfortable here again. I even thought that a new ruler might improve things for everyone. I thought Magneto might actually care about making peace between the two races. Pretty naive, huh?"

"What happened?" asked Bobby.

"They took my job first. I was a data processor, and I was good at it—but my company was forced to employ mutate labor, and I was laid off. I mean, I know we need to get more mutates into employment, but don't I have a right to earn a living too? Magneto says he's keeping humans in Genosha for our skills—but as soon as one of his own kind can be trained to replace us, we're thrown onto the scrap heap!"

"You couldn't find another job?"

"As a street sweeper, maybe. Or a refuse collector or an office cleaner."

"All the work the mutates used to do," said Bobby.

Debs smiled wryly, his implication not lost on her. "I know they have good reason to hate some of us. When I think of what the genegineer and his people did to them ..."

"But we all turned a blind eye to it."

"I know," said Debs, "but you must remember what it was like before the uprising. The mutates, they were just.. .just there, you know? We used to walk past them in the street and not pay a second thought to them. We didn't ask ourselves if they were happy, because to us they had no emotions. They weren't... weren't real people!"

"Because their minds had been tampered with!" protested Bobby.

"We know that now, yes," said Debs, "but at the time, we thought they were just... well, bom that way. As if they'd been put on Earth to serve us. I remember, we used to have a maid call at our house regularly. I saw her three times a week for the first eighteen years of my life, and I don't remember ever once saying a word to her. And I feel ashamed of that now, of course I do, but it's just... it's just how we were brought up, isn't it? It's how we were told the

world worked, what we were led to believe. It wasn't our fault!"

Bobby could have argued the point, but he felt he had said too much already. Fortunately, Debs showed no sign of becoming suspicious. She seemed to believe that his concerns were born of nothing more than liberal guilt. A guilt that she apparently shared.

Perhaps he had misjudged her. Perhaps she was a good person after all, her only crime one of inaction. He couldn't blame her for that: had circumstances been different, had Bobby Drake had a choice, then he too might well have kept his head down and lived a normal life. He certainly wouldn't have volunteered to become a target in a war between species.

He shook his head firmly. He wouldn't let himself be won over like this. No matter how good a sob story Debs gave him, only one thing mattered. "I still don't see why anyone has to die," he said. "No matter what the ... the mutants have done to me, I'm not about to march out into the street and slaughter the first one I see. I just can't do it!"

"I'll second that!" said Debs with feeling.

He blinked at her, confused. In turn, she peered at him questioningly, then her face softened into a broad smile. "I knew you were worried about something! You thought we expected you to go out and fight tonight?"

"You don't?"

"Of course not! Oh, Hendrickson will ask you—and he won't be too pleased when you turn him down—but I won't be going, and nor will about half the people in this base."

"So, what are you even doing here?" asked Bobby.

"I was turfed out of my home."

"By mutants?"

"By the government. I had too much space for one person, apparently, so they moved in a mutate family from the old settlement zone. Oh, they found me another place to stay: a bed in a flophouse, sharing a dorm with three other

women. It wasn't exactly in the most up and coming area, if you know what I mean. I went to sleep every night scared that I wouldn't wake up again. When I heard about this place ... well, it seemed like it was my best hope of staying alive. So, you see, we're in the same boat, you and me."

"Are we?" Bobby persisted. "I'm not sure I could put up with what Hendrickson's doing."

Debs grimaced. "I know, I know, I'm 'turning a blind eye' again. But he and the others say they're only fighting in self-defense, and I wouldn't know how to stop them even if I was sure it was the right thing to do. And I don't know v/hat *is* the right thing to do any more."

Bobby felt he ought to have responded to that-but he was disconcerted to find that he couldn't think of a word to say.

"How are you feeling now, *mein freund*?"

Wolverine was getting used to seeing Nightcrawler looming over him: his concerned face seemed to greet him every time he woke up. "Better'n I was," he mumbled. It was a lie. He felt as if he had the mother of all colds, his muscles ached and all he wanted to do was sleep. The gash in his side still burnt as if his blood had turned to acid.

Kurt wasn't fooled by Logan's bravado, but he gave him some water and made the usual reassuring small talk. He told him he was safe, that he just had to rest a little more, and promised him that he would be up and around, back in the bad guys' faces, in no time.

Wolverine interrupted him. "Are we alone?" he asked. He didn't have the strength to lift his head from the pillow and see for himself.

Kurt glanced around. "We have as much privacy as we will find here, I suspect."

"Have to tell you something." It was hard for Wolverine to say the words, and not only because his throat felt like sandpaper. "Been doing some thinking, and I reckon I know what... what's wrong with me."

The light in Kurt's eyes dimmed, and Logan guessed that he too had been harboring unvoiced suspicions. Wolverine had always been a realist, never one to fool himself. He had to face this. So, why then did it seem so much more difficult than any fight he had been in?

"When that... that mutate woman... when she scratched me...." He took a deep breath. "She did a lot more just tear my skin."

Kurt nodded gloomily. "You think she infected you."

"And not just any infection."

"We don't know that, Logan," insisted Kurt. "Until we can get you to a proper medical facility and run some tests . . ."

Logan shook his head grimly. "It all fits," he said. "The cold-like symptoms, the fact that my mutant gene's packing up on me-and let's face it, elf, what's the most common bug doing the rounds in Genosha at the moment?"

Nightcrawler lowered his eyes and stuck out his lower lip sullenly. Wolverine could tell that he didn't want to believe it, but he had no choice.

"Maybe it was just bad luck," mused Logan. "Her blood mingled with mine. Or maybe that was her power-to cultivate the virus and transmit it to others. Maybe the old genengineer gave her that ability... a way to keep the other mutates in line. . . ."

"Don't give up, Logan," said Kurt. "If anyone can lick this, you can." He took one of Wolverine's hands in his own: his white glove felt uncommonly warm against Logan's palm.

He didn't feel like talking any more. He was too tired. He let his eyes close, but he couldn't stop thinking about the alien cells that had invaded his body, of the wound that hadn't yet closed up because his system was too busy waging a war to keep him alive.

He remembered discussing this scenario with the Beast, not long ago, when it had still been comfortably hypothetical. Hank McCoy, of course, had been exploring another avenue in the quest that had come to dominate his

life; he had run a battery of tests on Logan to ascertain if his unique biology might provide a much-needed breakthrough. "Theoretically," he had concluded, "your body ought to be able to deal with the Legacy Virus. Unfortunately, the precise action of said virus is unpredictable, and its converse effects upon your mutant gene are an unknown quantity."

"In plain English, Doc," Logan had said, "my healing factor should be able to zap that sucker-but only if the virus doesn't get to it and screw it up first, right?"

"That is an accurate summation," Hank had conceded. A week and many more tests later, he had reached the conclusion that, even if Wolverine could shake off a dose of Legacy, there was no way to isolate his healing factor and pass on the benefits to other sufferers. His research had reached another dead end. He would probably have considered it ironic, thought Logan, that his theory was being put to the test anyway.

He must have drifted off to sleep, but the first he knew of it was when he was peeling his eyes open and looking at Kurt Wagner's concerned face again. "What's the matter, elf?" he asked with a weak smile. "Ain't you got a home to go to?"

"There's something else you ought to know, *mein freund*," said Kurt gravely.

"Don't tell me-more good news?"

"If you do have this virus, then the mutants here must not learn of it."

"Don't take kindly to sharing their living space with plague victims, I take it?"

"They don't understand, Logan. Every one of them has lost friends to the Legacy Virus, but they don't even know how it's transmitted. They're terrified of it."

"Can't hardly blame them. So, what do they do with their sick-put them out of their misery, I suppose?"

“Out on the streets, at least. They call them ‘the unclean’-although according to the mutate Priest, Magneto has set up facilities for them in Hammer Bay and the other major cities.”

“I can just imagine his face if I turned up there asking for treatment. Don’t suppose there’s even much hope of getting a bed incognito: Genosha’s mutates are all individually numbered, aren’t they?” Logan’s moment of good humor was spoilt by a painful coughing fit.

“By all accounts,” said Kurt, “these so-called field hospitals are little more than quarantined camps anyway. Half the mutates are more concerned with keeping the infected penned up away from them than they are with their health. They believe that Legacy is a punishment inflicted upon the unworthy by... by their deity.”

“I thought Maggie had the cure. That’s why we came here, isn’t it?” “If he does, Logan, then I’ve yet to see a single sign that anyone has benefited from it.”

“You think we might be on a wild goose chase after all?”

“I’ve heard rumors, but nothing concrete. Magneto might still be testing the serum—and I suppose it would take some time to mass produce it.” Kurt looked doubtful.

“Or maybe,” rumbled Wolverine, “Charley Xavier was right to be worried. Maybe old Bucket-Head has higher priorities for that cure than distributing it to the needy.”

CHAPTER 8

AS CYCLOPS returned slowly to consciousness, his first instinctive thought was to check that he was wearing his visor. To his relief, he could feel it, cold against the skin of his face. But something nagged at him all the same. Something was wrong.

He could feel a rough, lumpy surface at his back and nothing beneath his feet, but his sense of equilibrium insisted that he wasn't lying down. He was attached to something, sprawled across it at a thirty-degree angle. His limbs were pinned, one arm twisted almost behind his back. He had fought Magneto, he recalled—for all of about ten seconds. He didn't know exactly what had happened—it had all been so quick—but he could guess.

It wasn't until he was fully awake that Scott realized what was needling him. His eyes felt different. The pressure behind them, so familiar that he rarely noticed it any more, was no longer there. He opened them, and felt nothing. No burning sensation as raw power erupted through his retinas and strained against his ruby quartz lens for release.

And Jean was gone.

He couldn't feel his wife through their telepathic link. The realization sent a stab of panic into his heart, but he calmed himself with logic. Something had taken his mutant power from him; it wasn't unreasonable to assume that the same thing had happened to the rest of his team, Phoenix included. She was still alive, still with him, but psi-blind.

He was attached to a hulking metal sculpture, facing a blank wall. Turning his head as far as it would go, he could just make out a large blue, clawed foot at his ear. It could only have belonged to one person. "Hank?"

"Ah," came the familiar voice of the Beast, "our esteemed leader finally extracts himself from the tenacious

grip of the sandman. I was beginning to wonder for how much longer I would remain the only one of our number cognizant of our predicament."

"Are the others here?" asked Cyclops. "I can't see."

"If I extend my neck muscles, I can avail myself of a glimpse of Jeannie's red hair—and I believe I may have heard our resident weather elemental stirring a few moments ago."

"You're still in your Beast form."

"So it would appear—but I've been testing the limits of my strength and have found myself decidedly enervated. Am I to infer from your inquiry that you are likewise impaired?"

"Something must be nullifying our powers."

"I have visual contact with a probable culprit," said the Beast. "A young lady whose skinsuit identifies her as a Genoshan mutate."

No matter how he strained, Cyclops couldn't see who his teammate was looking at. The metal that held him wouldn't give: when he tried to break it, to pull his hand away from the twisted sculpture, it only dug into his wrist and drew blood. "What is she doing?" he asked.

"She is immersed in a rather tawdry form of literature. I have attempted to attract her attention, but she has steadfastly ignored my overtures toward her."

"I'm open to suggestions, Hank."

"Bereft of our paranormal abilities, and unless we can muster the physical power to break our bonds, I would conclude that we are helpless."

"That isn't what I wanted to hear," sighed Cyclops.

Storm came round next-and, after she had been filled in on the situation, she asked if the others had any memory of breathing in chloroform. Cyclops hadn't, but he didn't doubt the evidence of Ororo's senses. The revelation worried him, and made him redouble his futile efforts to break free. He had assumed that he had been out for an hour or two at

most-but if he had been anaesthetized, then who knew how much wasted time had passed? The room had no windows, and he had no way of knowing the time. The X-Men had been on a tight deadline from the start; what if Magneto and Shaw had put their plan, whatever it was, into action? What if it was already too late to stop them?

Scott was as relieved as he was apprehensive, then, when a door opened and footsteps marched into the room. At least he might learn the worst of it now; he would know what he was up against. To his frustration, he was facing the wrong way to see the newcomers: by his estimation, there were at least four of them. However, there was no mistaking the voice of the X-Men's oldest and most intractable foe: deceptively laid back and tinged by world-weariness, but with a threatening undertone.

"Our guests are awake, I see."

"I still say we should kill them." Cyclops guessed that the unfamiliar voice belonged to Lady Mastermind. He had glimpsed her in the ballroom, realizing who she was even as Phoenix had taken her out. Surprised as he had been to see her at Sebastian Shaw's side, it made a certain kind of sense. The original Mastermind had been affiliated with Shaw's first Inner Circle; clearly, Regan Wyngarde intended to follow in her late father's footsteps in more ways than one. Scott felt a painful mixture of anger and sadness as he remembered what she had put him and Jean through. He had to tell himself that the experience hadn't been real, that the emotions weren't relevant.

"I think we can afford to be magnanimous in victory," purred Magneto.

"You know better than that, Lensherr," said Cyclops, clenching his gloved fists. "You'll never defeat the X-Men until every one of us is dead!"

"You impress me as always, Scott," said the man once known as Erik Magnus Lensherr. "Even in the face of such overwhelming odds, you retain your characteristic bravado."

One day, perhaps, I will take your hollow boasts at face value and dispatch you and the rest of Charles's misguided students. Not today, though. We stand on the threshold of a new world order, my friends, and I want you to experience it."

"You have made such claims before," said Storm.

"Indeed," said the Beast. "Were I to indulge in a little armchair psychiatry, then I might diagnose an over-inflated confidence in your own capabilities."

Cyclops felt the metal shifting at his back, and he wondered for an instant if the master of magnetism had lost his temper and intended to crush his tormentors. He was powerless to resist as he was swung around to the front of the insane sculpture. Now, he was hanging vertically, his arms spread above him, his feet not quite touching the floor. The Beast hung to his left, Phoenix beyond him, and Storm settled into a similar position to Cyclops's right.

He could see his enemies now, through the faint ruby haze in which the world was washed by his protective lens. Magneto had swapped his robes for a black suit and tie, and he was accompanied not only by Lady Mastermind but also by Shaw and Tessa. In the corner of the room, by a wooden chair on which lay a battered paperback novel, stood a blonde, teenaged girl in a pink and black skinsuit. Lurking nervously at her side was a tall, wiiy male mutate in black and green, with a shaved head.

"I never thought Magneto would work with the Hellfire Club again," commented Storm.

"A temporaaiy alliance, I assure you," said Magneto, "but one that serves us both well."

"In my native Africa, we have a saying: 'If the tiger sits, do not think it is out of respect.'" The words were ostensibly directed at Magneto, but Ororo was looking at Shaw.

Magneto nodded graciously, but chose not to respond. "Allow me to introduce two of my fellow countrymen." He beckoned the mutates forward with a coiled finger.

“Miranda, as you have no doubt deduced, is responsible for your current weakened state. Her control over her ability is excellent: she can maintain her power-dampening field around you with minimal effort, whilst ensuring that my allies and I are not affected.”

“So, if any of you so much as twitch,” said Mastermind icily, “you had best be prepared to face your most terrifying nightmares.” “Until recently,” Magneto continued as if irritated by the interruption, “Miranda was kept on a leash and used against her own kind; those who had mind enough to rebel. Raul here has spent most of his adult life working in mines in intolerable conditions. Now, they have become free, equal and productive members of our burgeoning society.”

“OK,” said Phoenix quietly, “you’ve made your point.” Cyclops was overjoyed to hear her voice again, to know that she was awake and well.

“Oh, but I’m not sure I have, Jean.”

“The mutants may think you’ve improved their lives,” said Cyclops, “but what happens when you show them your true colors? What happens when they realize that their sovereign is a fanatic; a man who will abuse anyone and anything to further his own cause?” “Most of the mutants don’t yet know half of what I have done for them,” contested Magneto. “Take Miranda and Raul, for example. Not so long ago, they could have counted the remaining days of their lives on their fingers. I have restored them to full health.”

“Then the Legacy cure is effective,” surmised the Beast, and there was a hint of excitement in his voice despite the situation.

“It has eradicated the virus from their systems-and they will be the first of many to benefit from it. I have a team of scientists working to duplicate the cure. Oh, they had difficulty at first—the alien composition of the super-cell we extracted from your blood defies analysis-but they soon

found that, given the right conditions, the cell was only too quick to reproduce itself. The poor, disease-ridden mutants of Genosha call me their Savior, and that is precisely what I will become.”

“Your friend Shaw stole that cure from us,” snarled the Beast. “We would have ensured that everybody had access to it.”

“And how would you have done that, Hemy? By handing it to your government? By waiting as they performed months, years, of product testing? A mutant disease is hardly at the top of their political agenda, is it? And what then? Distribution through one of your pharmaceutical companies at a price that my country cannot afford? No, my friend, my way is better.”

“And what of the mutants outside Genosha?” asked Storm. “Will you be making the cure available to them too?”

“Not to mention the baseline humans to whom the disease has spread,” added the Beast.

“Well,” said Magneto, “that rather depends on a few conditions.” “Such as?” rapped Cyclops.

“Or need we ask?” said Storm coldly. “Magneto's goals are the same as they always are. The same as Selene's were. He wants to control other people, make them think as he thinks—and how better to do that than to wield the power of life and death over them?”

“You do me an injustice,” said Magneto. “My plans are more grandiose, further-reaching and ultimately more beneficial to the world than those of that soulless vampire.”

“Beneficial?” Phoenix's voice was still quiet, but it carried an angry intensity. “Is that what you call spreading Genosha's epidemic further? Is that what you call infecting hundreds of millions of innocent people with a terminal disease?”

Alarmed, Cyclops craned to see his wife's face. “What is it, Jean? What do you know?”

Phoenix didn't look at him. She was glaring at the Black King, her eyes burning with contempt. "Why don't you tell them, Shaw? Tell them what I saw in your mind."

"If you insist." Shaw stepped forward, his habitual smirk on his face, apparently unfazed by Jean's challenge. He addressed all four of the prisoners. "As you already know, the Hellfire Club will celebrate tonight's solstice with a worldwide pyrotechnic display. However, as you must also have suspected, there is an ulterior motive to the celebrations. Our fireworks contain an unusual payload. As midnight strikes and our trident symbol lights the night in each time zone, we will be spreading a great deal more than just seasonal joy to the masses."

Cyclops's stomach tightened, but he stopped himself from speaking. Shaw and Magneto were both in talkative moods-they had come here to gloat-and he needed to learn all he could from them.

"For the most part," said Magneto, "the Legacy Virus has spread slowly. Only the Genoshans have suffered in great numbers: perhaps the operations performed upon our mutants by the previous government made them somehow more susceptible. However, in the course of their study of the virus, the scientists at our Kree facility in the Pacific Ocean found a way to change that."

"It's quite simple, really," said Shaw. "All we have to do is piggyback Legacy onto a common cold virus, and release that hybrid into the upper atmosphere."

"At first, we had no practical use for such a discovery. We would not have been able to control its effects. But now-"

"Now, you can infect as many people as you like," snapped Cyclops, unable to hold his silence any longer, "and treat only those who swear allegiance to your twisted ideals."

"The rate of transmission will increase exponentially," confirmed Shaw. "My dear?"

He looked at Tessa, who responded obligingly: "I estimate that there will be almost a hundred thousand new cases of Legacy by the New Year. By the end of January, the figure will be closer to a million. Within a year, it will be almost impossible to avoid infection." "Most satisfying of all," said Magneto, "the virus will no longer discriminate between humans and mutants. In fact, I must confess to enjoying one rather poetic irony of the situation. Our cure was evolved from the Beast's mutated blood cells. I am told that, when injected into human sufferers, it may well activate any dormant mutant genes in their own DNA. Any human who wishes to survive this plague, then, will not only have to rely upon the blood of his sworn enemies, but will risk becoming a mutate himself."

"And, of course, he will have to come crawling to you first," said Phoenix.

"Of course. But I do not intend to be unreasonable. Only a small number of people—those who have shown their intolerance of our kind—will be denied the cure. The rest will be given an opportunity to prove that they deserve it."

"You're talking about cold-blooded murder!" spat Cyclops.

"I am talking about making those who have power in this world accept their responsibilities—for if they do not, then their successors will. I am giving them an incentive to do the right thing. We will start by demanding new anti-discrimination legislation."

"Along with greater power for yourself and your associates, I presume," said the Beast.

"We will never have equality until mutants are represented at the highest levels of society," said Shaw. "That is an ideal to which my Inner Circle has always subscribed."

Magneto smiled. "You could even say that, by weeding out the perpetrators of anti-mutant hate crimes, we will be helping evolution to take its natural course."

“There is nothing natural about germ warfare,” snarled Cyclops, “especially not when your weapon is a man-made virus.”

Magneto drew closer to the X-Men’s field leader, an eyebrow raised in mock surprise and a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “Always so disapproving, Scott—but don’t you see? I am about to create a world in which mutants need not fear, need not hide their very natures. That is the much-vaunted dream of your precious mentor, is it not?” He clapped a hand on Cyclops’s shoulder, like a benevolent father. Scott wanted to recoil from it, but he was held too fast, and so he settled for showing his distaste in his features instead.

“We may be fighting for the same thing,” he said, “but Professor Xavier would never tolerate your methods-and nor will I!”

“You cling to the belief that humanity can be persuaded to improve our lot. But for how long have your X-Men fought that lost cause, and what have you gained? I have tried it your way, Scott-Xavier’s way—and it does not work. The humans hate us, as the Nazis hated the Jews. They know that we are destined to replace them, and they fear their passing.”

“And people like you only give them all the more reason to hate and fear. Your plan won’t change that, it will only make things worse!”

The good humor drained from Magneto’s face, and now his eyes burnt with a white fire. Suddenly, Cyclops was reminded of what a formidable opponent this aging, gray-haired man could be. “What do I care for the opinions of a miserable, stunted species that will die out within a few generations anyway? My only concern is that we are free from their mindless persecution-and if they must be coerced into leaving us alone, then so be it. They started this war-and it was their choice, not mine, to fight it with deadly force!”

“You’re wrong,” said Cyclops quietly. There was nothing else to add. He and Magneto had had this argument many times-but it wasn’t in his nature to stop trying, to say nothing in the face of such overwhelming hatred.

“A shame, then, that your opinion no longer matters.” Magneto turned on his heel and strode toward the door. “I am leaving now for Genosha, from where I will coordinate the release of the Legacy Virus. When next we meet, it will be in a better world-and you will thank me for what I am about to do, one day.”

“We’ll get out of here,” Cyclops shouted after him, “and we’ll come after you. Even if you release the virus, we can still take the cure from you!”

Magneto paused on the threshold and looked back at the captive X-Men. “Do not strain yourselves. My associate will release you himself in two or three days. By then, the cure will have been distributed to Genosha’s mutants, and I will be more than adequately defended. Be warned, my former allies: anyone who dares violate the boundaries of my country from that day forth will face the wrath of a vengeful nation.”

He left then, and the mutate called Raul scurried uncertainly after him. Lady Mastermind threw a lopsided smirk in the X-Men’s direction before following. As the Black King made to do likewise, however, Storm stopped him in his tracks with an angry bark of “Shaw!” He turned to face her slowly, his expression placid. Tessa frowned. Miranda, who had been about to retake her seat, hesitated.

“You may be a snake, Shaw,” said Ororo hotly, “but I thought better of you than this. I cannot believe that even you would go along with Magneto’s insane scheme.”

“As my colleague said,” said Shaw evenly, “it will benefit all mutants, myself included.”

“And ultimately,” said the Beast, “it will bring about a world in which non-mutants have no place. Over whom would you laud your enhanced physical prowess then?”

“Do not presume to know me,” growled Shaw, “either of you.” “Unfortunately for you, Shaw,” persisted Storm, “we *do* know you. As does Magneto. He knows that you would not wish to live under his rule any more than we do. However and whenever you plan to betray him, he will be prepared.”

“You fought alongside the X-Men before,” said the Beast, “when circumstances necessitated it.”

“But this time,” said Tessa abruptly, “the game remains under Sebastian’s control. The introduction of extra players to the board would only complicate matters.”

“Your lapdog is doing a lot of talking for you, Shaw,” said Storm. “But remember this: Magneto plays the game well too, and this time the stakes are dangerously high.”

Shaw smiled, and his eyes glistened darkly. “Why else would the game be worth playing?”

It was evident that the Black King had his own agenda, and that he wasn’t about to discuss it. Cyclops almost wished that Phoenix had read more of his thoughts when she had had the chance-but she would have intruded as little as possible, even in the mind of an enemy.

Shaw turned to his assistant. “Miranda is to keep them helpless,” he said. Tessa must have passed the instruction on telepathically because, a moment later, the young female mutate nodded obediently and sat down on the wooden chair.

“I’m afraid I too must take my leave of you now,” Shaw addressed the X-Men. “After all, I have a party to organize this evening-and it is past six o’clock already.”

He looked directly at Cyclops as he spoke, a malicious grin on his face as if he knew the effect that his words would have. Scott gritted his teeth, determined not to betray the icy fear that formed in his stomach and spread to encompass his entire body.

It was the Beast who put that fear into words, once Shaw and Tessa had left the room. “It appears that time is rather

shorter than we might have hoped.”

Phoenix called over to Miranda-and, undeterred when the girl did not respond, she talked to her in a gentle, reassuring tone. She sympathized with the hardships from which the Genoshan mutants had been rescued, but asked Miranda if it was right to make other people suffer as she had suffered. She met with no more success than the Beast had. The girl remained infuriatingly silent, occasionally turning the pages of her book.

“I am beginning to suspect,” said the Beast, “that young Miranda is not merely unwilling to listen, but incapable of same.”

“I think you’re right,” said Cyclops. “Remember how Tessa had to instruct her telepathically?” He strained at his inflexible bonds again. “We need ideas, people, and we need them fast. We have a lot of work to do, and we’ve got just under six hours to do it. As soon as that first firework goes up at midnight tonight, Magneto and Shaw will have won!”

CHAPTER 9

THE CLOSER Rogue drew to the center of Hammer Bay, the more building sites she passed and the more busy people she almost _ran into. Magneto had obviously decreed that Genosha's reconstruction should begin with his immediate environs. Perhaps it would be easier to believe his work done once the poverty, disease and strife that were endemic to his country had been pushed out of his sight.

Worried at first, Rogue had tried to take back roads and alleyways, but it was impossible to avoid being seen. She was comforted, however, by the fact that nobody had spared her a second glance. Why would they? She could probably have taken to the air, she thought, without raising an eyebrow. Most of the site laborers were mutates, after all. Many of them could stretch or fly, reaching difficult areas without having to erect scaffolding. Welders could do their jobs without the benefit of expensive machinery, using their own bio-energies, and hod-carriers could lift three times the load of their human counterparts. It occurred to Rogue that the mutates had been bred precisely for this type of work, and she shuddered.

She had found a woolen sweater left unattended by the side of one site, and had taken it gratefully, disposing of the half-melted jogger top that could only have drawn attention to her. The sweater had a roll-neck, and it was baggy enough for the casual observer to imagine that she wore a skinsuit beneath it. Emboldened by her apparent anonymity, she ventured closer than she might otherwise have dared to the command center: a former magistrate base, which now served as the seat of the newly formed government. She observed it from all angles; at one point, she walked right past it with the assured gait of one who had somewhere to get to. She pretended not to be interested in the mutate

guards, members of-what were they called again?-the Genoshan Unified Military Patrol.

The last time she had come here, an ally had teleported her into the main control room. But then, her intention had been to confront Genosha's new sovereign. This time, she hoped to keep Magneto unaware of her presence.

She thought about flying to the top of the tower and trying to pry open a window, but she would probably have been seen, if not from inside then certainly from without.

Finally, she took a deep breath and ran up to the relatively secluded back door of the building. Two guards brought up their rifles suspiciously. "You've got to come quick," Rogue panted, clutching her side as if injured. "They're killing us back there!" She tugged at the sleeve of one of the mutants, but he didn't move. "Humans," she elaborated, "with magistrate technology. They've attacked my building site. We need reinforcements, fast!"

The mutate blinked at her impassively. His lips were thin, his nostrils pinched. "Didn't you hear me?" she cried, her desperation only half-feigned.

"I have already notified Command of the situation," said the mutate.

"We cannot leave our post," said his female colleague with an equal lack of emotion.

Well, thought Rogue, it was worth a shot. But on the whole, this was why she usually left the big plans to Cyclops. Not that it was exactly her fault that one of the guards had turned out to be a telepath-and at least she had had the foresight to work out a backup plan.

She had already removed her gloves in preparation, which was just as well. She could feel an itch in her brain, and the male mutate's brow furrowed as he came up against her unusually strong psychic barriers. Rogue clapped her hands to his cheeks before he could probe further or raise the alarm. It was lucky for her that his

magistrate gas mask was slung around his neck, leaving his skin exposed.

She held on to him until he sagged and fell away from her; longer than she would normally have risked, but she had to be sure that she was leaving him unconscious. Everything that he was, *she* was now. Her name was Aidan Morgan, and she could feel the hole in her life, the years she could barely remember when she had been brainwashed into trailing around after human magistrates, warning them of rebellious sentiments in her fellow mutates. She felt sick as she saw herself standing over one of her fallen masters, ignoring his pleas for mercy, reaching into his mind and *twisting* it until the pain killed him. She felt pride that *she* wore the uniform now, she had taken control. Most of all, she felt Aidan Morgan's burning passion for revenge. And then, as his telepathic abilities—*her* abilities, now-kicked in, she felt her mind invaded by a million stray thoughts, until finding her own thoughts, finding her self, was like searching for a single voice in a cacophony.

And she couldn't breathe. She didn't know why. She didn't even know who or where she was any more, but an emergency signal was banging away in the back of her head, and every time her lungs tried to take in air, she found her mouth and nostrils blocked. She tried to fight it, tried to find the neural pathways that connected her brain to her arms and legs, and lashed out with all her strength.

It was one of her worst struggles yet. But finally, Rogue emerged whole from a world of noise and confusion-to find herself spread across the Genoshan sidewalk.

It was as if her entire skeleton had dissolved, leaving her a fleshy sack without structure. She fought down the urge to panic, to scream. She told herself that this couldn't possibly be real, it had to be a bad dream. Somebody else's bad dream. But she was in control again now, and the world fell back into place around her as she sifted out which of her recent experiences had been her own and thrust the others

into a dark recess inside herself from which she prayed that they would never emerge.

Somehow, she knew how to peel herself off the floor and reshape herself. Her bones were there, she realized, but they bent and stretched like rubber. Humanoid once more but feeling giddy, she looked down at the mutate guards, both of whom were unconscious. The woman had splayed herself out to three times her normal width, and lay almost flat against the floor. So, that was where Rogue's unexpected pliability had come from. The mutate must have wrapped herself around the X-Man and tried to suffocate her, not realizing what would happen when she touched her. No wonder she had been so confused. Indeed, now that she could tune out the distracting telepathic voices-at least to an extent-Rogue felt the woman's additional presence inside her. Her name was June.

The voices disturbed her. They reminded her of her nightmares. Sometimes, she felt as if she held onto a part of everybody she had ever absorbed, kept them locked up in a prison cell in the back of her mind. Sometimes, at night, she heard their voices screaming at her and she woke up in a cold sweat, fearing that they might break free and overwhelm her.

She felt unsteady on her feet, unsure of herself as if she weren't quite here, weren't quite controlling her own actions. She tried to ignore the sensation, concentrating on the matter in hand. She dragged the two guards inside the building. They would be missed soon, if only by the mutates whom they had sent to an imaginary disturbance. Rogue had to move fast.

She accessed June's memories and found her knowledge of the command center's layout. Magneto, she learned, had installed a team of scientists in a basement laboratory, where they were working on a top secret project. She smiled. Things were going her way at last.

She hurried along a deserted hallway and down a flight of stairs. With luck, she thought, she could find the lab, snatch the cure to the Legacy Virus and be out of this place before anybody else saw her.

Bobby Drake glanced nervously around the tiny, empty storeroom. Having given up hope of leaving the magistrates' base through the main door, he had plucked up the courage to search a few more rooms for an alternative exit. He had bumped into several people as he had explored, but fortunately nobody had seemed interested in what he was doing. He hadn't really expected to find anything, but now here he was, staring up at an inviting hatchway in the ceiling and wondering what lay on the other side of it.

He was on the topmost level of the base-at least, he could find no stairs to take him higher. Was it possible that the hatchway led outside? It made sense, after all, for the magistrates to have had an emergency escape route.

He peered out through the storeroom door and, seeing nobody, closed it gently. The walls of the room were lined with dusty shelves, and he tested one to see if it would take his weight. Then, he climbed upward and reached out across the ceiling until he could take hold of the hatch's locking wheel and turn it. It spun easily, and the thick, circular hatch fell inward and away from him with a heavy clang that made Bobby wince. He was horribly aware that, if anybody caught him here, he would have no explanation for his actions.

The hatchway didn't lead to daylight, but nor did it lead to another section of the white-lit base. The space beyond it was dark, and it smelt faintly of wet rot. Straining his muscles, Bobby reached up until his fingers found the lip of the hatchway. Then he swung out across the room and hauled himself up through it.

He found himself on the flat roof of the base. The surface beneath his feet was steel, but he was standing among the timbers of the surrounding warehouse. The ceiling of the old building was barely a foot above his head-and his heart skipped with delight as he saw dust motes dancing in a vertical shaft of light. He hurried toward the filthy skylight and operated its clasp, but it was locked.

He made to smash the glass, reasonably sure that nobody could hear the sound from below-but closer inspection showed that it was reinforced. He formed a crowbar out of ice instead, and forced it into the narrow gap between the skylight and its frame. His first attempt to lever the window open ended in the shattering of his makeshift tool-but he repaired it, making it stronger this time, and tried again. The window began to give, just a little.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Bobby started, dropped his crowbar and whirled around to find Debs standing behind him, wearing a magistrate's padded uniform and aiming a magistrate's rifle at his chest. He cursed his own stupidity: he had become too absorbed in his task, in thoughts of freedom, to hear her sneaking up on him.

"This isn't what it looks like," he said lamely.

"Oh? Then I didn't just see you create that thing out of thin air?" Debs drew closer to him, the rifle shaking a little in her hands. "The only thing around here that 'isn't what it looks like' is you, Drake. You lied to me. You're a stinking gene freak!"

"I'm a mutant!" snapped Bobby.

“Same difference. I suppose you were going back to your friends, were you? Now that you’ve found us, you were going to lead them all back here to kill us!”

“No!”

“I trusted you, Bobby. I thought you were different. You said you didn’t want to fight.”

“I don’t!” he insisted. He was waiting for his moment, ready to ice up. The rifle’s armor-piercing bullets could almost certainly penetrate his frozen shell, but he could take Debs by surprise, hit her with the world’s biggest snowball and disarm her before she had time to react. But he hesitated, seeing something in her expression: something to suggest that the situation wasn’t hopeless, that she wanted to believe him. He held out his hands in appeal, and said: “Look, I may have been born a mutant, but I’m not a Genoshan. I’m an X-Man, if that means anything to you. When you found me last night, I wasn’t trying to get out of the country, I was trying to get in.”

Debs peered at him through narrowed eyes. “Go on,” she said.

“OK, so maybe yesterday I might have sided with the mutants if it had come to it,” admitted Bobby, feeling that total honesty was now the best policy. “I know what they’ve been through, and I was ready to blame all the Genoshan humans for that. But you reminded me that everybody’s different, that I can’t blame an entire race for the actions of a few people. I hope you can see that too.”

“What are the X-Men doing here?” asked Debs, still suspicious. “We think Magneto might be about to threaten the world again. We’re here to find out what he’s planning, and to stop him if we have to.”

“Will you get rid of him for us?”

Bobby shook his head sadly. “If we could. Look, Debs, this mission is important-and I’m grateful to you and your friends for saving me from the border patrol, but I have to get out of here! Will you let me go? I promise you, I don’t

have any contact with the mutants.” “And if you do? If you run into them outside?”

“I wouldn’t tell them about this place. I don’t want to be the cause of any more deaths.”

“And the attack tonight?”

“I...” Bobby almost resorted to a lie, but he was sure Debs would see through it. “I don’t know. If it came to it... I think I might warn

them___Hendrickson’s planning a massacre!”

Debs kept the gun trained on him for a moment longer, then she lowered it and nodded. “OK. I’m going to let you go, Bobby. My instincts tell me you’re a good person, and you’re right-I shouldn’t change that opinion just because of the makeup of your genes.” Bobby smiled wanly. “If only there were a few more people like you ... ”

“But you can’t go out this way. The skylight’s wired up to a silent alarm. Hendrickson would have troops out front before you could hit the ground.”

Bobby grimaced. He had been so close.

“Come with me,” said Debs, sounding sure of herself again. She flicked on the rifle’s safety catch, tucked the weapon under one arm and dropped lithely through the open hatchway into the storeroom below. Bobby followed her, dismissing the paranoid suspicion that she might be leading him into a trap.

They hurried down several flights of stairs and emerged into the main atrium, where they were greeted by an impatient Hendrickson. “Where have you been?” he asked Debs. “The rest of the party is all ready to go; they’re only waiting for you.”

Bobby found himself holding his breath as he waited for Debs to answer.

“I’ve been showing Bobby the ropes,” she said. “I thought he might come out with us.”

“Are you crazy?” retorted Hendrickson. “Do you want him dead?”

"It's a simple reconnaissance mission," said Debs. She half-turned to Bobby, and explained: "We're checking out the village building by building. Sometimes, we find food. Sometimes, we find equipment." "And sometimes," said Hendrickson, "you find genejokes. Or they find you."

"There'll be half a dozen of us-and we know where their main base is now; we can steer clear of it. Anyway, the mutates hardly ever attack in broad daylight!"

"Drake isn't ready. You saw what happened last night-he almost got himself killed!"

"I can look after myself," protested Bobby.

"Not without the right equipment you can't," shot back Hendrickson. He shook his head decisively. "No, you're staying put for this one-but I'll take you down to the armory and get you kitted out." He clamped a strong hand on Bobby's shoulder and guided him away. The X-Man cast a forlorn look back at Debs, who threw a tiny, helpless shrug in his direction before moving to join her colleagues at the door.

"It's just that I get claustrophobic," babbled Bobby as he was led from the atrium. "I'm starting to feel hemmed in. I think I need some fresh air."

"We'll try you out on the hardware," said Hendrickson gruffly. "If you're good enough, you can come out with us tonight. Did Debs tell you? We've got a mutate nest to burn out!"

Bobby swallowed hard, fell into step beside the heavysset man and said no more.

The laboratory was unguarded, but it was sealed by a reinforced door with a locking pad. Rogue scowled at the numbered keys, searching the fading memories of Aidan and June but finding that neither of them knew the combination.

She hadn't seen anybody on this underground level. Had she had more time, she could have waited in hiding until

somebody came this way and opened the door for her. As it was, she was beginning to think that brute force was her only option. She would lose the element of surprise, though—and if Magneto was around, perhaps her life to boot.

Then, a third option occurred to her. She still possessed Aidan Morgan's telepathic powers, and his knowledge of how to use them. She let her mind drift from her body, shuddering at the weird, giddy sensation of disconnection. She felt like a ghost, tentatively feeling her way around a psychic landscape that corresponded to the shape of the building above her. She skirted around Magneto's throne room, knowing that his psychic defenses were prodigious. If her mind brushed against his, he would surely know about it.

A parcel of thoughts called to her with its familiarity, and she steered herself toward it. She recognized Jennifer Ransome: a mutate whom the X-Men had once liberated, now Magneto's chancellor. Rogue found herself looking through Jenny's eyes, thinking her thoughts-and somewhere, her own body drew a sharp intake of breath at the sudden change of perspective.

Rogue/Jenny was standing in a corridor, talking to a young man with short, brown hair and rugged, unshaven features. "I can't believe you're being so cynical about this," she said. "If you'd seen those two people ... the Legacy cure saved their lives!"

"I don't doubt it," said the man, "but if Magneto plans to do nothing more than end the epidemic, then why does he need this 'Hellfire Club? And why all the secrecy?"

Rogue/Jenny pouted. "Perhaps he doesn't want to raise our hopes until he's sure."

"He's keeping things from his own government!"

"Then perhaps he doesn't trust some of us. He has good reason!" "And don't you think it's some coincidence that he's doing all this while his son is out of the country? Pietro wouldn't have let him lie to us."

“What’s wrong with you, Phillip?” snapped Rogue/Jenny. “Do you *want* the mutates to keep suffering? Perhaps you want to follow in your father’s footsteps after all!”

Phillip Moreau blanched, and Rogue felt Jenny Ransome’s immediate contrition, and her love for this man. Phillip’s father had been the infamous genengineer, whose surgical procedures had facilitated the oppression of a race—but Phillip himself had been instrumental in changing all that. When he had seen the magistrates taking Jenny away, when he had learned his family’s evil secret, he had stood up and spoken out against the old regime.

“I’m just worried that Magnus is becoming too powerful,” he said quietly. “When he came here, he promised to end the fighting in Genosha. If that’s still his goal, then I’m behind him all the way. But I’ve heard how he talks about human beings, even those of us who work with him. I don’t know what he’ll do when he doesn’t need us any more.”

“I know,” sighed Jenny with an apologetic half-smile. “I’ve wondered about that too.”

Rogue had been riffling through the young mutate’s memories, and now she found what she was looking for. She withdrew her psychic presence even as Jenny and Phillip fell into an affectionate hug. She had invaded their privacy enough, she felt.

“I just don’t want us to go back to how it was before,” said Phillip, “with one race victimizing another.”

And then, Rogue was alone again, back in the basement and back in her own body. She hurried over to the lab door and used the last vestiges of her dissipating telepathy to scan beyond it, to see if she could expect a reception committee. To her disappointment, the lab must have been psi-proofed, because she couldn’t sense anything at all within its walls.

“All right, girl,” she muttered to herself, “here goes nothing!”

She tapped the four-digit combination into the keypad and stepped back, ready for anything as a mechanism whirred and the door finally slid open.

She swore under her breath as a figure stood revealed.

At seven feet tall with shoulders almost half as broad, he more than filled the doorway. His colossal bulk could be attributed to his containment suit: Rogue knew that inside the gold-plated armor existed a creature of pure energy, massed around a human skeleton. Behind a perspex chest plate, his ribs could sometimes be glimpsed through an atomic furnace. The plate connected to an equally transparent domed helmet, from beneath which a skull leered at her. Much to her regret, she had encountered this hulking engine of destruction before.

His name was Holocaust.

Bobby squinted along the sights of a rifle, his gaze tracking across a field of two-dimensional buildings. A figure appeared on a rooftop: a cardboard cutout of a mutate in a skinsuit, an orange flash of energy in his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he squeezed the trigger, and the gun whined as it fired a thin beam of light. The beam hit a sensor in the figure's head, and it fell backward. Bobby heard another cardboard target popping up to his right, and he shifted his aim and fired again. A third mutate appeared in a window, and then the figure on the roof was back. Next, a door flew open to reveal a woman in a magistrates' uniform; Bobby jerked his rifle around to cover her but, tempting though it was, he managed not to fire.

He had scored nine hits with nine shots, when suddenly his tenth target sprang out from behind a trashcan, much closer than he had expected. He leapt back, startled, as it hurtled toward him, carried by a concealed rail in the ground. The cutout was brought up short with a heavy clang, just a foot or two in front of his face, and he stared at it speechlessly as the main lights came back on and dispelled the red-tinted gloom of the practice range.

Hendrickson applauded as he stepped out of the shadows behind Bobby. "You did well," he said. "Very well indeed."

"I've always had a good eye," mumbled Bobby, still staring at the final target. In fact, he had spent many long hours in the Danger Room, the X-Men's hi-tech training facility, honing his reflexes and sharpening his aim. Of course, he was more accustomed to bombarding his targets with snowballs and ice darts than with bullets, but the principle was the same.

The only thing that had slowed him down was the bulky body armor beneath his dark green combat suit. He was used to having more freedom of movement.

"And don't worry about that last one. It takes most people by surprise. Just think of it as a warning: out there in the field, some of the mutants will be coming right at you."

"Thanks," said Bobby, grateful that Hendrickson hadn't guessed the true reason for his miss. He *had* been surprised, but not only by the target's sudden appearance: the Danger Room sprung tricks like that on him all the time. The reason he had hesitated, the reason he had been unable to fire, was that this target was more detailed than the others. And more familiar. Painted onto the cardboard was a rather good likeness of his teammate, Wolverine.

Tearing his eyes away from the worrying effigy, he asked: "So, do I get to go out with you tonight or what?"

Hendrickson smiled. "You're keen. I like that."

"And?" prompted Bobby.

"You're in. Frankly, you're too good to leave behind. Briefing at 1800 hours."

"And we leave at half past, right?"

"1830 prompt."

"I'll be ready."

Bobby tried to sound enthusiastic, but his insides were in turmoil. He had come to the conclusion that the fastest way out of this place was to go along with Hendrickson: the raid

on the mutate “nest” was to take place earlier than he had expected. “Those freaks have the advantage at night,” its orchestrator had explained. “Half of them can see in the dark, can’t they? Anyway, according to our intelligence, they have some kind of evening get-together. We can hit them when they least expect it, trap them in their own lair like rats!”

His plan was to abscond from the raiding party as soon as he could; with luck, he could still reach Hammer Bay by sunset. But where would that leave the people of this village; the mutates who were about to be slaughtered, and the humans who would die fighting them? He had been able to avoid thinking about it before. He had told himself he had more important things to worry about, that this was none of his business. But now, he felt involved. He felt as if he ought to do something-if only he knew what.

Hendrickson took the practice rifle from him and dropped it into a rack. “Now, let’s see about getting you something a bit more useful, shall we?”

He led the way down another corridor, stopped at a heavy, triplelocked iron door and produced a bundle of keys from his belt. Most of the shelves in the armory were bare, but Hendrickson found an old rifle and dropped it into Bobby’s hands. The X-Man stood quietly, feeling numb, as an ammunition belt was slung over each of his shoulders and a small silver grenade pushed into one of his belt pouches. “For emergencies only. We don’t have too many of these left. They’re like smaller versions of the sonic sphere: they let out a high-pitched shriek, which makes it impossible to concentrate. It’ll stop the genejokes from using their powers for a minute or so—just long enough for you to make a run for it.”

Further down the corridor, Hendrickson bobbed into a small storeroom and emerged with a magistrates’ mask and cap, which he tossed to his new recruit. “Good fit?” he asked as Bobby donned them reluctantly.

“Not bad,” said Bobby, his voice distorted by the mask’s speaking grille. The skin of his face was prickling beneath the cold, hard metal.

“As soon as we get outside, you put that mask down, right? Those monsters will throw everything they can at you: fire, acid, all kinds of weird energy. You need to protect your skin-and there’s a ventilator in there to deal with gas attacks. One of the local mutates can turn herself into a vapor and suffocate you-so you need the protection, believe me.”

As they moved on, they passed a window in an office door. Bobby caught sight of his own reflection in the glass, and hardly recognized himself. He remembered what Wolverine had said before, about a mutate in magistrates’ clothing. He had allowed himself to be turned into a symbol of oppression. Disgusted, he tore the mask from his face and let it hang from its strap around his neck. But what else could he do?

As they approached the main atrium again, Bobby heard voices raised in alarm, talking over each other. Hendrickson frowned and quickened his pace.

Debs’s reconnaissance party had returned—at least, four of its six members had. Bobby almost bumped into one in the doorway as he was carried through by two other men, his arms draped over their shoulders. His combat suit had been shredded, he had lost his mask, his face was pale and dirty, and his eyes were closed. The other three were slumped against the consoles in the atrium, exhausted and probably hurt, surrounded by concerned colleagues.

Hendrickson’s voice cut clearly across the babble. “What happened here?”

The answer came from several people at once.
“Mutates!” “Gene freaks!” “They were ambushed!”

One member of the ill-fated expedition levered herself to her feet, although she was clearly in pain. “We lost Mark. They killed him. And ... and David ... he’s hurt bad. ...”

“And Debs?” Bobby stepped forward. He couldn’t help himself. “Where’s Debs?” ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘

The woman met his yearning gaze for a second. Then, she lowered her eyes and shook her head despondently.

“What’s happened to her?” The question emerged as an imploring cry.

“She went down,” said a middle-aged man with dark hair and a moustache, who was sitting on the floor, his back propped up against a console, his rifle lying carelessly beside him. “Hit by an energy beam. She was alive, but we couldn’t reach her. The genejokes must have her!”

“And you just left her?” Bobby made for the airlock door. “We’ve got to get back out there!”

Hendrickson placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Not yet, son. We’ve got a plan, remember? We attack at 1830. If we go off half-cocked before that, we’ll just lose more good people-and we’ll throw away everything we’ve worked toward.”

“But Debs!” he protested hopelessly. “They’ve got Debs. What if they hurt her?”

Hendrickson shook his head sadly. “There’s nothing we can do for young Debra just now, son. If the mutates have her, then she’s almost certainly dead already. We have to accept it!”

If Rogue had learned one thing in the Danger Room, it was that hesitation could be fatal. She threw herself at Holocaust even as he was turning and stooping to fit his bulk through the doorway. She didn’t-couldn’t-think about how powerful he was, about the fact that he and a colleague had once given even Earth’s most powerful team of super heroes, the Avengers, a run for their money. She cannoned into his golden armor, but it was like colliding with an ocean liner. She felt as if she had put her shoulder out.

Still, she must have taken Holocaust by surprise, because she got past him. Either that or he thought he would have more room to fight her in the huge, white, brightly-lit

laboratory than in the narrow corridor outside. Rogue was still unsteady on her feet, still hardly aware of her new surroundings, when a mighty, metal-encased fist struck her from behind. She fell to the ground beside a lab bench, and Holocaust extended his left arm toward her. In place of a hand, he had a huge, dome-shaped attachment dotted with holes. Bright energy roiled inside it: the essence of Holocaust himself. His containment suit allowed him to channel his very being through this appendage, turning it into a devastating weapon.

"I am honored," said Holocaust mockingly, in his crackling, sizzling voice. "One of the X-Men themselves has come to challenge me. Any more of you lurking out there?"

"Just little old me, sugar," said Rogue, scrambling out from beneath his blaster. Holocaust didn't fire: he was toying with her. She had to take advantage of that. She vaulted over the bench and ducked down behind it. She heard her foe's footsteps pounding toward her, but she tried not to let that unnerve her. She slipped her fingers beneath the heavy wooden block and, with a strain, she lifted it and threw it. It shattered as it hit Holocaust, glass beakers smashing on the floor and papers fluttering everywhere.

That gave Rogue a second to get her bearings and glance around the room. There were shelves and cabinets everywhere, and all manner of equipment-most of which she couldn't even name-spread around the perimeter. She flew at the nearest cupboard and yanked open its doors, revealing rows of chemicals in vials. She batted the first rank aside, letting the vials fall and break where they may, but she couldn't see anything that looked like a cure. As if she would recognize it anyway, without a clear label.

She hadn't forgotten Holocaust. He had waded through her obstruction by now, and raised his weapon to fire. Rogue took to the air just in time. There was a tremendous *foosh* of energy, which seemed to set the world alight. And suddenly,

the cupboard was burning, its spilt contents igniting easily, and that was one avenue of exploration lost to her.

Holocaust couldn't do that too many more times; not without a recharge. Even so, Rogue was no physical match for him. She had to keep out of his reach, keep baiting him, make him fire again and again. With each blast, he would become weaker. Unless, of course, he hit her. Then, he would replenish himself by absorbing her fading life force.

"You're working for Shaw again, right?"

"I'm working *with* Shaw."

"And here I thought you'd decided not to be anyone's poodle any more."

Holocaust came at her like a runaway tank. Rogue took to the air instinctively, but there wasn't enough clearance between his head and the ceiling. He filled her field of vision.

She threw a punch at him, aiming for the transparent part of his containment suit over his chest, hoping to crack it. The blow didn't seem to hurt him, but it forced him to take a step back. Rogue saw clear air beside him and hurtled into it. She wasn't the most maneuverable of the X-Men, but in his cumbersome armor, Holocaust wasn't quick enough to catch her.

She took shelter behind another lab bench, but he blew it apart with an energy blast. He was losing patience, thought Rogue. Either that was very good or veiy, veiy bad indeed.

"I was the heir apparent to a world once," he roared as he bore down upon her again. According to the X-Men's files, Holocaust hailed from an alternative version of Earth, although the details were sketchy. He had been the protege of the man who had ruled that world, a powerful being known as Apocalypse. "I will have that again!"

"Sure," Rogue mocked him, "just as soon as you find the right set of coattails to ride to the top, huh?"

Holocaust's enormous fist left a dent in the wall behind her as she twisted past him again. But this time, he was

ready for her. He caught her with a sideswipe from his arm, and she went into a tailspin and collided with another cabinet. Holocaust picked her up by the front of her sweater before she could get her breath back, and he batted her across the face with such force that it felt as if her neck were going to snap. She writhed in his iron grip, but she couldn't break it. He swung her around and threw her into a set of shelves. Rogue heard glass breaking behind her as, winded, she slid to the floor.

And then, Holocaust had her pinned, one giant foot resting on her chest, his hollow eye sockets seeming to glow as his lipless mouth twisted into a sneer and he brought up his weapon arm, slowly, tauntingly, and leveled it between her eyes.

"One less person in my way now," he growled.

And Rogue's vision was seared by a tremendous explosion of heat and light, for an instant before the world went dark.

CHAPTER 10

“EIN!” EXCLAIMED Nightcrawler. “*Under no circumstances!*” “Listen to me, elf,” croaked Wolverine urgently, reaching up to squeeze Kurt’s hand. “I’ve lost all track of time in this sickbed, but I know we’ve been here more than a few hours.”

“It’s almost five pm, local time,” mumbled Kurt.

“Right. That means it’s getting on for nine in Hong Kong, and-what?-eleven in Sydney. All points east of here, the Hellfire Club parties are already in full swing.”

“I know,” said Kurt, nodding ruefully. “Whatever Shaw and Magneto are planning, it could begin at any moment. But-”

“But nothing! You’ve got better things to do than nursemaid me.” As if to undermine his argument, Logan was gripped by another convulsion. His body went rigid, his spine arcing. Kurt’s heart ached for the pain he must have been going through, but there was nothing he could do. He had watched this happen three times before, and the attacks were getting closer together. “Looks like this is it,” Logan had said after the first convulsion. “The fight’s stepped up a gear in there. Kill or cure, it’ll soon be over.”

He lay back now, panting, his face glistening with sweat. But as soon as he got his breath back, he continued as if nothing had happened: “Rogue and the kid might have reached Hammer Bay, or they might not. I’m still in no condition to hit the road again. You could be our last hope.”

Kurt sighed. “I know you are right, *mein freund*—but the mutate Priest is suspicious of us already. If he finds I’ve flown the coop, he’ll turn his attention to you.”

“I can deal with old Skull-Face—and I won’t let this damn virus take me out either. I’m a fighter, Kurt. I’ll still be here when you get back.”

Kurt forced a bittersweet smile. "You'd better be!" But he couldn't escape the nagging fear that he was talking to his best friend for the final time.

He felt he ought to say something more. A last goodbye, just in case? But Logan withdrew his hand, and said gruffly: "Go on-get out of here!" Kurt nodded gratefully, an unspoken affection and understanding passing between the two men.

And then, he heard the searing sound of an energy discharge, and a scream.

Rogue was teased back to consciousness by a smell like ozone and an insistent buzzing in her head. Opening her eyes, she gasped to find a familiar face in front of her: Magneto, dressed in his full battle robes and helmet. He must have shocked her awake.

For a second, she saw her old foe in a new light. Magnetic force rippled around him, almost visible and quite intoxicating. And she knew he would wield that force against anyone or anything that dared threaten his people. He was the only man who could protect her.

She realized that a lingering trace of Aidan Morgan had resurfaced inside her, distorting her perceptions, and she fought it down with a shudder.

"Fancy... running into ... you here ..." she murmured weakly.

Her face felt as if it had been sunburned. She didn't know why Holocaust hadn't killed her: whether he had been under instructions not to, or whether he had simply not had enough power left. Either way, she was grateful. She was in a small cell with a heavy door, which stood open behind Magneto. Her arms and legs had been spread behind her and clamped to the wall by thick metal tubes, leaving her to hang in an uncomfortable X shape.

"I did not spare your life to engage in small talk," said Magneto tersely. "I suspected, when I saw that only four of Xavier's children had made the journey to Sydney, that I

would find more of you here. How many X-Men have invaded my country?"

"Actually," lied Rogue, "this is a solo mission. The Professor must have thought I was best placed to talk a bit of sense into you."

Magneto's eyes flashed. "We have discussed this tiresome subject before. You think we share a history, but we do not. You are, thinking of another man."

"The man you used to be."

"That man has gone forever."

"Oh, I don't doubt that, sugar. I've seen into your mind, remember? I've seen how twisted, how screwed up with hatred, you've let yourself become."

"Think yourself lucky," Magneto growled, "that you-like my naive doppelganger-have never had to witness the horrors I endured, never had to bathe in the fires that tempered me."

Rogue rolled her eyes. "Oh, here we go again! I'm sick of hearing how you can't be blamed for anything, how one bad experience in your childhood gives you the right to murder and maim as you please!"

Magneto's expression was incandescent. He slapped Rogue hard across the face, then tore back his sleeve to reveal a number tattooed on his arm. She winced at the sight of it. "You call this 'one bad experience'?" he blazed. "Do you think we should just forget that one race attempted to commit genocide against another?"

"I'm sorry," said Rogue, bowing her head. "But," she insisted, "it was normal human beings who fought against the Nazis and beat them!"

"And yet they continue to slaughter each other over land disputes, grievances so old that they don't even remember the causes and don't understand, or simply in the name of so-called 'ethnic cleansing'! No, we must never allow ourselves to forget humanity's potential for destruction, Rogue—for that way lies extinction!"

“And you think mutants are so much better?”

“We are a higher form of life, that much is unquestionable.” Rogue shook her head. “You don’t think Apocalypse is as bad as any human war criminal? What about Stryfe, the mutant who released the Legacy Virus? Or Selene? Or for that matter, your new friend Shaw, a man who builds mutant-hunting Sentinels for the government? I’ve been in enough scrapes in my time to know that scum comes in all shapes, sizes and colors.”

“Our kind has been systematically mistreated since we began to emerge. We have each had to fight back in our own way. You are not so different yourself.”

Rogue was wrong-footed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You belonged to the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, did you not? A group of freedom fighters—some would say terrorists—which I myself founded and christened ironically.”

“I... I was young, then. I didn’t know better. Mystique ...”

“You were a victim of circumstance,” said Magneto triumphantly, “a product, as we all are, of your upbringing. You experienced only hate, and you gave it in return.”

“Until I chose to take responsibility,” said Rogue. “Until I went to the X-Men.”

“You had no choice,” laughed Magneto scornfully. “You needed their help to control your abilities. And Charles Xavier indoctrinated you just as surely as Mystique had.”

“That’s not true!”

Magneto’s face softened into a confident half-smile. “We shall soon see who is right and who is wrong. Oh, I don’t imagine I can solve all our problems overnight—you are right about that much—but it will be interesting to see how our race develops without the weight of human prejudice upon us, don’t you think?”

Rogue narrowed her eyes, feeling ice in her stomach. “What are you planning?”

“Let us simply say,” said Magneto, “that I will not see another generation of mutants shaped by abuse!”

The mutants had captured a human being.

She was young and slender, with short, brown-black hair and a heart-shaped face. She was wearing a magistrate's uniform, but her weapons had been taken from her. A livid burn stood out on her temple from where, Kurt gathered, she had been winged by a blast of bio-energy while trying to break free. She was not struggling any longer.

They were taking her to the end cellar—a whole crowd of mutants, so thick that their captive was virtually carried aloft on the tide. As one woman said to Kurt, with a chilling certainty, “Our Priest will tell us what we ought to do with her.”

Kurt tagged along with them as they poured into the chapel, because he had a very bad feeling about this. The Priest, already standing behind his altar, received his visitors with a serene expression, as if he had foretold their arrival. Not that it would have been at all difficult to hear them coming. The woman was pushed to the front of the crowd to allow the Priest to examine her. Despite her injury and his imposing height, she straightened her back and looked him mutinously in the eye.

“They were sniffing around Jasper Street,” offered one of the mutants.

“Six of them, there were—all armed to the teeth!”

“But they ran like cowards when they saw us.”

Everybody was talking at once now, offering their own version of events, and Kurt couldn't hear what anyone was saying. He began to make his painstaking way through the throng, slipping into gaps where he saw them. He had to be near the front. In case he was needed.

The Priest held up a hand for silence, and the clamor ceased immediately. He walked around the altar and drew closer to the prisoner, looming over her, his thin lips twisting into a smirk.

“So, young lady,” he said in a quiet but threatening voice, “what is your name?”

She spat in his face.

A few people gasped, but the Priest’s expression didn’t flicker. He turned away and wiped his cheek with a white sleeve. “It hardly matters anyway,” he said, “except perhaps to your next-of-kin. We know you well enough. We call you Oppressor;’ We call you Murderer. We call you War Criminal!” His tone sharpened further with each insult-and by the time he had finished, he was back behind the altar, his blue eyes as cold and hard as ice. “And soon, in the eyes of the Great Lord, our Savior, we will call you Dead.”

“What has she done?”

Kurt Wagner’s question cut across the general murmur of approval, and turned it into whispers of discontent. The Priest glared at him, his eyes narrowing as his brow furrowed. The front two lines of mutates parted to allow Kurt forward, and he found himself by the human woman’s side. She looked at him quizzically, perhaps even hopefully.

“What has she done,” he repeated, “to deserve execution?”

“If you were truly from Carrion Cove as you claim,” rumbled the Priest, “then you would not ask such a question. You would know how the humans have treated our kind.”

Kurt forced himself to ignore the ominous reaction behind him. He looked the Priest squarely in the eye as if challenging him to prove his suspicion. “Not all humans,” he contested. “From what I hear, it was our people who struck the first blow in this case.”

“We walked into an ambush!” the woman spoke up, obviously unwilling to let Nightcrawler do all her talking for her. “We were looking for food, and for that a good friend of mine was killed in cold blood! How dare you try to paint *me* as the murderer here!”

Her tone of righteous indignation did not sit well with the mutates. "Jasper Street is ours!" somebody made himself heard over the general hubbub. Somebody else added: "You walk into a mutate area, you deserve everything you get!"

"Since when did Magneto start divvying up streets?" the woman spat back at them. "I didn't see any signposts or fences out there!" She was only riling them further. Kurt tried to calm things down.

"Magneto doesn't want our two races to fight," he reminded the mutates reasonably. "Those days are over. He wants us to work together to rebuild Genosha."

He felt he might have got through to some of them, had it not been for the Priest. "And yet, this woman wears the uniform of a magistrate!" he announced with theatrical intonation. "She carries the weapons with which her people once subjugated and beat us!" "For self-defense!" the woman protested angrily, but her words were lost beneath the roars of the crowd.

The Priest's raised voice, on the other hand, carried easily. "The Savior has forgiven many flatscans, that much is true. So long as they show repentance, He allows them to work for our country's greater good. But there are those who still feel nothing but contempt for our kind-and to those sinners, Magneto would have us show no mercy!"

The mutates were pressing forward now, gathering around the woman as if they intended to kill her there and then. Nightcrawler was left with no choice. He flung an arm around her, visualized the street above him and teleported. There was a moment of nothingness. Then, Kurt reappeared in exactly the spot he had just left. Beside him, the woman fell to her knees with a sickly groan. He was feeling the pain of another tandem 'port himself, but it was nothing compared to his horror at the failure of his ability, at finding that he was still surrounded by baying mutates.

“You are forgetting, Mr. Wagner,” said the Priest, “that I channel our Savior’s powers. He allowed me to detect your movement through the magnetic lines of force and, by redirecting them, bring you back to us.”

“Traitor!” somebody shouted, and Kurt felt hands tearing at his hair from behind.

He fought back, but the mutates took the Priest’s silence as a taciturn approval of the attack. They piled on top of Kurt, punching and kicking and spitting-and when he tried to teleport out from beneath them, he only returned to his starting point again. He doubted that the Priest was a match for his so-called Savior, but his magnetic powers were certainly formidable. Little wonder, then, that these people held him in such reverence.

And then, somebody’s intrusive fingers found a pouch in his clothing-a pouch that couldn’t be seen but could be felt-and dislodged the image inducer from within. As the device was ripped away from Kurt, the illusion of his blue and red skinsuit blinked out. A collective gasp rose from the mutates as they pulled away from

their victim, the better to see what they had just revealed. With malicious satisfaction, the Priest said: “My suspicions about Mr. Wagner were justified, I see. He is not one of us.”

“I’m not the only person here without a skinsuit,” said Kurt, but his cause was already lost.

“You are the only one who thought to conceal the fact,” replied the Priest smoothly. “And what of your aspect? Is this too a deception? A disguise? Could these grotesquely distorted features be a human attempt to mock us, to hold us to ridicule?”

“I’m a mutant,” said Kurt sullenly. “You know that. You’ve seen what I can do.”

“Ah. A mutant but not a mutate?”

“My abilities evolved naturally. I am not from Genosha.”

“Indeed not,” said the Priest triumphantly, exposing his tombstone teeth. “This costume-” He ran a disparaging eye up and down Nightcrawler’s red tunic, “-betrays your true nature.”

“We still have much in common!” Kurt addressed the crowd imploringly.

“I hardly think so,” said the Priest tartly. “You are an enemy of our Savior, are you not? An X-Man! A mutant terrorist who has pledged to overthrow Magneto’s rule of Genosha.”

“Th-that’s not true,” stammered Kurt, but his denial was met by hoots of scorn and derision. “I mean, I *am* an X-Man,” he admitted, “but. . .” Nobody was listening any more.

“And he’s brought the rest of his team with him!” shouted the human woman, to Kurt’s surprise. She was standing again, her fists clenched defiantly. “I’ve already met one of them. You can do what you like to us, but it’ll do you no good. The X-Men are going to bring that tinpot little dictator you call a Savior to justice! It’s all over for you, you gene freaks!”

“Enough!” snapped the Priest, and there was silence again in the chapel. “The guilt of this man and this woman is only too evident,” he continued after a suitably dramatic pause. “And there is more. I have been unable to heal our other new recruit, and now the reason why has become clear. He too is an X-Man, undeserving of our Savior’s grace. Indeed, he has already been dealt the just fate of the heathen.” A ripple of fear passed through the Priest’s attentive audience. He raised his voice. “Yes, Mr. Logan has the Legacy Virus—and Mr. Wagner here deliberately kept that fact from us. He brought his cohort here to us the hope that his filthy pestilence would spread. But he reckoned without the strength that our faith gives us, the protection that Magneto extends to the pure of heart and the true of deed.” The

Priest bowed his head and placed his hands flat on the altar before him. "I must meditate now. I must commune with our Savior, through the power of the magnetic fields, and learn what He would have us do with these sinners."

The Priest closed his eyes, and Kurt realized that this might be his last chance. He couldn't teleport, but he still had his natural agility and his other abilities. It was a long shot, but perhaps he could snatch the woman, leap to the ceiling and be out of here before any of the mutates could use their own powers against him. But even as he tensed himself, ready for action, he felt the air around him crackling and he was unable to move a muscle. The Priest, far from communing with anybody, was manipulating his magnetic field, paralyzing him.

The Priest's bald head jerked back up, and his eyes snapped open. The mutates waited breathlessly for his pronouncement. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of Kurt's neck.

"Our liege is pleased with us," said the Priest. "Through our diligence, we have confounded his enemies. Kurt Wagner will receive Magneto's personal attention: he is to be taken to the command center in Hammer Bay on the morrow. His friend has already been judged, and will not be allowed to pollute our clean air any longer. He will be sacrificed."

"You'd kill a man just because he's sick!" cried Nightcrawler. "How does that make you any better than the magistrates?"

The Priest ignored him. "The human woman has demonstrated her intolerance. She cannot be redeemed. We will not suffer her to live a moment longer."

The woman swore at him, but she didn't move. Kurt realized that she was held fast too. And then, the Priest turned to glare at her, and his blue eyes looked as if they were on fire. The woman's face turned pale and she bit her lip. She was in pain, but trying not to show it. The mutates

backed away from her in awe, and Kurt could sense the charge in the atmosphere, could almost see the forces that were gathering to tear her internal organs apart.

He yelled his throat raw, appealing for reason, for mercy, to no avail. He strained to reach the Priest, just a few feet away from him, but he couldn't so much as move his hand. He couldn't even turn away, but he closed his eyes and offered a silent prayer Heavenward as the woman finally let out a piercing, gargling scream, which was abruptly curtailed.

A tear teased its way through Nightcrawler's eyelashes and welled onto his cheek.

Three strands of barbed wire had been strung across the end of Jasper Street, wrapped around streetlights on each side. Resting against the barricade was a wooden board on which somebody had scrawled "HUMANS KEEP OUT" in white chalk. And bound up in the wire was a bedraggled corpse, its magistrates' uniform in shreds, a bloody hole in its chest. A warning of a more graphic kind.

The man's name was—had been—Mark Jameson. His friends had come here, despite the danger, to see that he received a dignified burial. Everybody had agreed that, uncivilized as they were, the mutants would not have provided one. Hendrickson had been reluctant to send a rescue party out so close to his briefing, but feelings had run high and he had had little say in the matter. There were tears now, shudders of revulsion and dark mutterings about vengeance. One woman bowed her head and said a quiet prayer.

Iceman felt out of place, as if he were intruding upon their private grief with his combat suit and his rifle and his secret. He looked away, sickened, as Mark Jameson's friends began the painstaking process of detaching him from the barbs.

Bobby's job was to cover them as they went about their task. He lined up alongside another eight stoic sentries in an

arc formation, and watched the lengthening shadows. "The genejokes will expect us to retrieve the body," Hendrickson had warned, "but they're unlikely to turn up in force. They know we'll be mob-handed, and they won't want to risk a major confrontation. They're cowards at heart." Even so, Bobby had been warned against the danger of a lone sniper. He wore his gas mask for protection. He wondered what he would do if he saw a mutate. His gun had no 'stun' setting. Could he bring himself to use it? He resolved to fire a warning shot first: he could always claim to have aimed for the target and missed. If that didn't work... then what?

He had no right being here at all. With time running out, he had finally overcome the biggest obstacle between him and his goal: he had found his way out of the humans' fortified base. He should have been halfway to Hammer Bay by now. He had had more than one chance to slip away on the short journey across the village.

But he couldn't stop thinking about Debs. She had been good to him, all things considered. He had liked her. He couldn't leave her to die. He had even tried to persuade Hendrickson to bring the attack on the mutates forward. The X-Men would have gone in now, however much it compromised their plans, because a life was at stake. Not that he could have said as much, of course. Nor had he been able to refute the cold logic of Hendrickson's argument. He had considered going after Debs alone, but it would have been suicidal-even if he could have sweet-talked somebody into telling him where the mutates' base was.

"It's good to see such fire in you," Hendrickson had said-a little patronizingly, he had thought. "Hold on to that, Drake. You'll need it against those genejokes tonight!"

That was when Bobby had realized what he must have sounded like: so eager to embark upon a mission which, not so long ago, he had been dreading. A mission alongside armed non-mutant human beings. A mission with the stated

intent of killing their genetically gifted cousins. A mission against his own kind.

“All I care about,” he had said just forty minutes ago, “is getting Debs away from those freaks before they hurt her!” In his anger, he had let the insult trip off his tongue. He hadn’t thought about what he was saying, what the words meant. He felt ashamed.

And he didn’t know what he would do next: when he had saved Debs—if he could—but in the process had become caught up in Genosha’s civil war. When he tried to think about it, it felt like a black hole looming over his future, in which he could see no light. He felt helpless and afraid and frustrated at the senselessness of the whole situation.

But, for all his training, he couldn’t think of a single way out of it.

Raul Jarrett was standing alone outside Magneto’s throne room, wondering what he was doing here. He felt light-headed, and a pain was growing in the pit of his stomach—too little food and too much tension over the past two days, he supposed—but he didn’t know what else to do.

Magneto hadn’t said a word to him since Sydney. Perhaps Jarrett had incurred his disfavor somehow. He thought he had performed well enough when he had reported finding nothing in Shaw’s rooms, when he had deceived his leader—but Magneto was the Savior, allpowerful, and Jarrett still couldn’t shake the fear that he could see into his heart and mind.

Perhaps the Savior had seen his doubts. Perhaps he had seen how the revelation of his plans had disconcerted him. Perhaps he was disappointed in his subject.

Magneto, Jarrett told himself, knew what was best for the mutants. It was not his place to question his wisdom. But he remembered how he had suffered with the Legacy Virus, and it seemed cruel to inflict such suffering upon others. Not that some of the humans didn’t deserve it—particularly those ex-magistrates and politicians who had fled Genosha

before they could be punished—but many had done nothing wrong. It was likely that they only wanted to live in peace, but Magneto was about to drag them into a war. Raul Jarrett knew how that felt.

He had not expressed his opinion, of course. He had followed the Savior wherever he led-and, when Magneto had strode into his throne room without dismissing the wretched mutate, the door swishing shut behind him, he had thought it best-perhaps safest—to wait. In the absence of further instructions, however, he was beginning to feel tired and foolish.

He was glad to see the friendly face of Jenny Ransome, his former nurse, as she turned into the corridor. She frowned at him as she reached the throne room door, and asked what he was doing here. He explained, falteringly, as best he could, and she thought for a second before drawing him conspiratorially to one side.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Magnus, haven’t you?” she said. It felt odd to hear the Savior referred to in such a familiar way. Jarrett nodded dumbly, and Jenny asked: “Has he said anything to you? Did he tell you what his business was in Sydney?”

“Um ... well, he didn’t say anything *to* me. ...”

“But you do know?” she asked urgently.

Jarrett felt his blood freeze. Was she trying to trick him, to prove Magneto’s suspicions about him? She was a member of his government, after all; surely she knew what was going on? But his gut instinct said otherwise—which, in some ways, was worse. He had already betrayed his leader for Sebastian Shaw, now he was being asked to do so again.

“I... I don’t . . .” he stammered, glancing reflexively at the closed door.

“Come on Raul,” she said, smiling sweetly. “You wouldn’t be telling just anybody, would you? You know you can trust me.”

"I don't know if I... the Savior . . ." He longed to tell her, to share his concerns with somebody who could reassure him and make things better. But all he could think of was the four X-Men who had dared to oppose Magneto, trapped in the metal sculpture.

"I know he's mass-producing the Legacy cure-but there's something else, isn't there?"

Tears pricked at the backs of Raul Jarrett's eyes. "Please don't make me ..." he whimpered.

And then, the door slid open, and Jarrett jumped and almost cried out as Genosha's sovereign towered over his chancellor, his expression grim. "Do you have something to say to me, Jennifer?" he asked in a cold voice.

"I..." She hesitated. "Yes, Your Eminence. Yes, I do."

Magneto nodded curtly and stepped aside to allow her past. As the shadows of the throne room swallowed her, he turned to regard Jarrett with dispassionate eyes as if wondering what he were still doing here. "I have no further need of you, Raul," he said finally. "You may return home."

"I... I don't have a home, my liege."

"I see," murmured Magneto. Then, out loud, he said: "See Mr. Moreau. He will arrange accommodation for you. And Mr. Jarrett?" He stiffened, his heart beating fearfully.

"I can rely on you, I hope, to forget anything you may have seen or heard recently?"

"Y-yes, my liege," stammered Jarrett, nodding enthusiastically as he backed away.

As soon as the throne room door had closed again, he turned and ran. But he didn't get far.

The muscles in his legs were aching, and he wanted to be sick.

Nightcrawler had been taken to a dusty cellar corner, almost walled in by high shelves. Here, his wrists had been bound behind his back with sturdy cord, and attached to a set of pipes which led to an old boiler. His image inducer had been destroyed and his hidden comm-set taken from

him. Then, the Priest had lowered a dome-shaped metal helmet onto his head, and Kurt had winced as he had felt slender needles piercing his scalp.

"An old magistrate device," the tall man had said in his baritone voice. "I never imagined I would find a need for it, but we live in strange times. It blocks certain nerve signals. It will prevent you from using your special abilities or, indeed, removing the helmet itself." With a smile, he had added: "After all, I cannot give you my undivided attention all night, can I?"

Kurt had made another plea for his friend's life, but it had failed as he had known it must. "Do not worry," the Priest had sneered. "You will have an opportunity to bid farewell to Mr. Logan. You will be our guest at this evening's service, during which the purification of his soul will take place. In the meantime, Louise will take care of you. She's a telepath, you know. So, be assured that I will know immediately if my presence here is required."

Louise, it transpired, was the gray-haired woman with whom Nightcrawler had spoken at breakfast: the one with the baby, although she must have left Magnus with somebody else while she was on guard duty. She took her assignment seriously: she sat straight-backed in a wooden chair at the point where the shelves gave way to the rest of the cellar, and she stared fixedly at him.

When Kurt's stomach rumbled to remind him that he hadn't eaten all day, he cast a wan smile in her direction. To his disappointment, she blanked him completely.

He cleared his throat. "That woman probably had a family, you know."

Louise said nothing.

"Brothers and sisters. Parents. A child, perhaps. Or a husband."

Still no response.

"I wonder how they're feeling now. I wonder if they're waiting for her to come home. Jumping at every sound.

Beginning to fear the worst, but still hoping against hope.”

Her silence might have been a good thing. Her jaw was clamped shut, and she had shifted her gaze to stare past him. As if she couldn't allow herself to hear him. As if she feared that his words might have an effect.

Kurt went in for the kill. “Is that how you felt when Michael was killed, Louise?”

Louise's eyes flicked toward him, just for an instant before she forced them away again. She drew in a deep breath.

“That was his name, wasn't it? Your baby's father. You must miss him veiy much.” Kurt wondered how much time he had. The evening service was at half past six; it had to be some way past five now.

He had made his point. It was time to try another tack. “I've met Magneto, you know,” he said casually. This time, Louise's eyes remained upon him. She didn't quite believe him, he could see that. “Many times, in fact. He was an ally once.”

“You are lying!” she snapped.

“Our goals are not so very different. The X-Men, like Magneto, want equality for mutants. It is only over our methods that we disagree. He thinks to achieve peace through the use of deadly force, but history tells us that he can never be successful. There is a fine line, *mein liebehen*, between a freedom fighter and a terrorist.”

“Magneto knows what is best,” she said automatically. “He is the Savior.”

“He is a man, Louise, that is all. A mutant.”

“No!”

“He may have great powers, but that doesn't make him a deity.”

“He was put on this Earth to end our suffering! You're lying! You're lying!”

“I'm telling you the truth, Louise. Magneto's origins are the same as yours and mine.”

She shook her head furiously, her hands over her ears. "I will not hear this blasphemy!"

Kurt shouted at her, angered by her unwillingness to listen: "His name is Erik Lensherr. He is a survivor of a Nazi death camp, scarred by his experiences. The X-Men first encountered him when he launched an unprovoked assault on a military base in America. The last time I saw him, he had caused almost irreparable damage to Earth's electromagnetic field, threatening all life on the planet. You're a telepath, Louise. Look into my mind, and tell me then that I am lying to you."

There were tears in Louise's eyes now, but her glare was mutinous as she jumped to her feet. "I don't care what you say," she shouted back, "and I don't need to read your thoughts. I know the truth!"

"You know what your Priest has told you-but he's using you, Louise. He'll say whatever it takes to maintain his own power over the mutants. Why can't you see that?"

"If it weren't for Magneto, I wouldn't have my son!"

"He controls magnetic fields," scoffed Kurt. "He can't create life!" "He is our Savior, and I won't let you persuade me otherwise!" "Are you so narrow-minded that you won't even consider another point of view?"

Louise's expression hardened, and she scowled at Nightcrawler with a steely determination that he hadn't imagined she could possess. She drew herself up to her full height, and said primly: "I am not narrow-minded, Mr. Wagner. I simply have faith!"

The words hit him like a crossbow bolt to the heart.

He had lost his temper with her, frustrated by her stubborn insistence on clinging to her own worldview in defiance of all reason. But how would he have reacted himself in her position? Could he have constructed a logical rationale for his own religious beliefs? Of course not: his faith was an instinctive thing. He couldn't prove the existence of his God-but he would have refuted to his dying

breath the suggestion that Jesus Christ was just another man.

"The difference between my God and yours," he said quietly, "is that mine wishes me to not to kill, especially not in his name. There is no greater sin."

"It is people such as you and the humans who cause all the suffering and death in the world. Magneto only exacts divine retribution. He brings justice."

"He has blood on his hands," said Nightcrawler, "as will all the mutants if you stand back and let your Priest murder my friend." But it was hopeless. He knew now what he was up against, that this was an argument he could not win.

And from that moment on until the Priest came for him, he said nothing more.

CHAPTER 11

OST PEOPLE thought of her as efficient and ruthless, without conscience or feeling. But those people didn't know the real her. Nobody did. She had worked hard to build a facade around f, and to maintain it whatever the circumstances, whatever the tiersel cost.

M

If anyone had read her mind now, if they could have seen her agonizing uncertainty, they wouldn't have recognized her. They would have wondered what she was doing, standing alone in this corridor with her ear pressed up against a closed door. She could hear nothing from the room beyond. The X-Men had been prisoners for many hours now, and they had run out of things to say to each other. She could sense their presence, though. Her mind brushed against theirs—just a light touch; nothing that they, without the powers of Phoenix, could have detected-and she knew they had given up hope. They couldn't escape the trap in which Magneto had placed them. Not without some form of outside intervention.

She wondered if she could help them.

Her name was Tessa. She had no surname: she had left it behind a long time ago, along with her old life, when she had joined the Hellfire Club.

She had been a teenager, then. She had spent most of the intervening years at the side of Sebastian Shaw. She had come to know him as nobody else did, as few ever had. Away from him, she had no existence. And in turn, she had earned his rare trust. She hadn't used her psychic powers to manipulate him-she hadn't dared be so overt-but she had been able to read any suspicions in his mind and act to quell

them. Shaw had never realized quite how powerful a telepath she was. She had had to be. Her own mind had been probed several times by Hellfire Club members such as Selene, Emma Frost and Madelyne Pryor. She had always been able to conceal her true self from them. Sometimes, she had had to bury it so deeply that she had become, in thought as well as deed, the woman she pretended to be.

She had had to make many tough choices. In order to prove her loyalty to Shaw, she had done things of which she wasn't proud. But she had known, when she had accepted this assignment, that it would be difficult. And lonely. Not even the X-Men knew that their founder had also recruited Tessa, and sent her on a mission deep undercover. Charles Xavier had foreseen a time when the Hellfire Club would become a major threat to the world. Her job had been to keep him apprised of its activities-and, only when it was absolutely necessary, and when she could do so without jeopardizing her cover-to intervene.

Tessa had saved the X-Man Psylocke from the organization's clutches, but she had been unable to do the same for Phoenix. She hadn't known about the original Mastermind's plans for Jean Grey until it had been too late. If she had been able to anticipate the outcome of those plans—the accidental unleashing of the creature known as Dark Phoenix-she would have acted sooner. She didn't want to make the same mistake again.

But things had changed recently. She didn't know why, but her relationship with Shaw had felt strained ever since his trip to the future. It had been a subtle shift in his manner, at first, and the odd stray thought. She had hoped it was unimportant but, without knowing exactly what he had seen, it was impossible to be sure. She had considered probing his mind, but he had built up his defenses to the point where that would have been extremely dangerous.

And then, he had challenged her about Emma Frost-as if he had expected her betrayal, her passing of his secrets to

the erstwhile White Queen. He had appeared to accept her explanation this time, and he had said nothing more about the matter. But his trust in her had been eroded, and that made her position increasingly untenable.

It would have been easy for Tessa to do something. Almost too easy. She could steal into the mind of the young mutate Miranda, and alter her perceptions. Miranda would believe that she was maintaining her dampening field around all four prisoners, but in reality it would have shifted just far enough for one X-Man to regain his or her abilities. A month ago, she could have done it, and Shaw would never have suspected her involvement. The X-Men's escape would have been blamed on a momentary lapse on Miranda's part. Now, it was likely that he was watching her, waiting for her to prove to him what he already suspected.

He had not confided his plans in her. In itself, this was not unusual, but it presented Tessa with a problem. Storm and the Beast had been right: she had no doubt that Shaw planned to turn on Magneto somewhere down the line. Perhaps he had the situation in hand, in which case she would be foolish to risk exposing herself. But what if he intended to wait until after the Legacy Virus had been spread and lives imperiled? What if he made his move only for Magneto to second-guess and defeat him?

And what if he was counting on Tessa to free the X-Men behind his back? The Black King considered himself an expert reader and user of people, and that was just the sort of game he might play. Perhaps that was why he hadn't appeared too concerned when she had brought the mutant heroes into play in the first place. Perhaps this was a test for her: a test that he expected-and needed-her to fail.

It would have been easy for Tessa to do something.

But what if she made the wrong move?

The party had been in full swing above Cyclops's head for at least two hours. A regular drum beat and the sound of conversation, muted by the ceiling, had lulled him into a

fitful doze. As he surfaced now, chiding himself and wondering how he had been able to sleep no matter how tired he had been, he realized what it was that had coaxed him awake.

He could sense Jean in his mind again. He smiled at her loving telepathic touch. *You 're back*, he said to her without speaking.

I don't know why, she confided, *and my psi-senses are still weak—but at least I can feel them again*. She sounded overjoyed; Scott realized that, for her, having her mind imprisoned in her own body must have been like being blinded.

My optic blasts aren't working, he reported. *The dampening field must still be in force, it simply isn't affecting you. Are you strong enough to deal with Miranda by yourself?*

I don't think she even realizes what's happened yet. I'm going to try stimulating her sleep centers. She probably won't read that as an attack, in which case she might not think to rectify whatever it is that's gone wrong.

Good plan!

Cyclops waited tensely as a minute passed, and then another. He could still hear the beat of the music upstairs, like a clock ticking down the seconds until midnight. They had to be approaching the final hour now. But in this small, well-lit room, nothing seemed to happen.

Then, finally, Miranda's head began to nod, and she let her book fall into her lap and took a deep yawn. She looked over at the captive X-Men, and for once, Cyclops was glad of his visor because it concealed the fact that he was staring at her intently, willing her to succumb to Phoenix's psionic manipulation.

The Beast, hanging between Scott and Jean, must have noticed something or picked up on a change in the atmosphere, because he threw a questioning glance in his leader's direction. Miranda, fortunately, did not appear

suspicious. She yawned again, and her head nodded onto her chest. She probably thought she could rest her eyes for a moment—but Phoenix had other plans, and soon the loudest sound in the room was that of Miranda’s rhythmic breathing.

A minute later, Cyclops’s eyes began to bum again.

“Well done, Jean,” he breathed. He twisted his head to look up at the band of metal that held his left arm in place. His wrist was bloodied and his sleeve torn from his previous attempts to break it. He aimed carefully at the manacle and closed his fingers, tapping a palm stud to activate his visor. He opened it only a fraction, allowing a pencil-thin beam of energy to escape but concentrating all his power into that beam. At first, he feared it wouldn’t be enough, that he was still too weak. But the beam grew in strength with each second away from Miranda’s influence, and it began to cut through the metal like a laser.

It took Cyclops another five painstaking minutes to free first his left leg and then his right arm. He was able to drop the short distance to the floor now, and stoop close to his remaining trapped limb. At such close range, he could risk a wider-angled blast, and he made short work of the thick loop of metal that encircled his leg above the knee. By now, the Beast had removed a constricting band from across his chest, and one from around his arm, his restored strength augmented by Phoenix’s telekinesis. Ignoring the shooting pains of pins and needles in his hands and feet, Scott helped them to finish the job. It took less than two minutes, after that, for the combined efforts of the three X-Men to pry Jean loose.

Once they had stepped away from the sculpture, Storm could act at last. Three forks of lightning stabbed through the air, targeted precisely to explode her bonds at their weakest points. Anyone still touching the conductive metal would have been electrocuted; anyone but her. A beatific

expression settled upon the weather elemental's face as she soared free, and the smell of ozone filled the small room.

"What now?" asked Phoenix.

"Now," said Cyclops, "I think it's time we brought an end to the festivities."

He led the way through the corridors of the Hellfire Club building, relieved to find them empty. Music still played in the ballroom, but most of the well-heeled guests had spilled out onto the verandah and down toward the harbor. The trident display, Phoenix had learned from Shaw's mind, was to be set off from the roof, so she and the Beast headed up there to stop it. A grandfather clock told Cyclops and Storm that it was half past eleven: time enough to deal with the situation here, but what about the other parties across the world?

They created a stir as they raced out into the warm night, Storm spreading her black and golden cloak and taking to the air. Some people didn't notice them at first—or, filled with alcohol, were slow to react to their appearance—but others gasped, and more than one glass was dropped. Cyclops shouldered his way through the crowd, faster than it could part for him: he had to find Shaw and Tessa before they knew what was happening.

Fortunately, from her vantage point, his teammate had already spotted one of their targets. A powerful updraft caught Tessa's old-fashioned black ball-gown and lifted her into the air, where Storm was waiting for her. The trick to dealing with the Black King's assistant was to keep her off-balance, unable to concentrate to use her telepathic abilities. Her physical strength was no greater than that of any normal human being: now that Storm and Tessa had closed in hand-to-hand combat—and in the air, at that—the battle would be brief and the outcome in no doubt.

Cyclops knew where to head now: it was unlikely that Tessa would have strayed too far from her employer. Sure enough, he soon spotted Shaw being hurried away by

concerned guests, along with a man and a woman who must have been members of Sydney's own Inner Circle: non-mutant members, hopefully. In a sea of monkey suits, the anachronistic finery of the fleeing trio was hard to miss.

As he went after them, some people tried to intercept him. He handed off the first three with ease, but their example inspired others to find their courage. A wide but low-powered burst of energy from his eyes shocked, discouraged and scattered them.

Cyclops caught up to his prey even as Shaw reached the front of the Hellfire Club building. He waded through the Black King's would-be bodyguards, spun him around, seized him by the ruffled front of his shirt and slammed him against the French windows, an arm across his throat. The expression on Shaw's face was thunderous.

"Go on," growled Cyclops in his ear. "Fight hack! Show these good ladies and gentlemen what you can do. Let them know that their precious club is really run by mutants. And give me an excuse to wipe the floor with you!"

Shaw glared at him for a long moment before composing himself and readopting his familiar smirk. "I do not intend to fight you, Mr. Summers," he said. "However, I am afraid I cannot speak for all my associates."

Without relaxing his grip on the Black King, Cyclops turned his head to find Lady Mastermind behind him. He unleashed an optic blast, which struck her in the chest—but as she fell, she metamorphosed into a stunned partygoer in an elegant white frock. An illusion. And now, because he had fallen for it, the crowd was beginning to panic.

He cast around for a glimpse of his true foe—and saw her, striding unhurriedly toward him. She was wearing a black gown: the same one, Scott realized, that Tessa had been wearing. And she was carrying Storm, slung unconscious across her shoulders. The onlookers drew away from her, unsure who she was and what she was about to do. If this was an illusion, then everybody could see it this

time. Even so, Cyclops held his fire, his fingers hovering over his palm stud, until he could be sure. He couldn't risk hurting another bystander.

Lady Mastermind stopped a few feet in front of him, and dropped his teammate. "Poor, confused Storm thought she had picked up Tessa," she smiled. "Imagine her surprise when I switched the concepts of up and down in her mind. She saw the ground coming toward her, and tried to pull up. The result was quite spectacular. Fortunately, her body gave me a soft landing."

"Whatever you do to me," said Cyclops, setting his jaw determinedly, "I'm ready for it. I'll know it's not real. I won't let go of Shaw."

Lady Mastermind laughed. "So sure of that, are you, X-Man? So sure you know what is real and what is not?"

And suddenly, Cyclops could feel the manacles around his wrists and the ache in his muscles again. "No . . ." he whispered to himself as a cold realization enveloped him.

"Oh yes," she said, "I'm afraid it's true. You never escaped from Magneto's trap. You're still there."

And he could see it now: the plain walls of the room breaking through what he had thought of as reality. He could feel the metal at his back, see Miranda at her guard post again. Shaw, the Hellfire Club building and the late-night revelers faded away, and the only thing that remained constant was her: Lady Mastermind, regarding him with malicious glee. "Did you really think you could escape us? I have enjoyed toying with you, X-Man; giving you false hope only to snatch it away. But now, the time for games has past."

"Are you all right, Scott?" asked Phoenix, still trapped as he was. "What did she do to you? What did she make you see?"

"Whatever it was," lamented the Beast, "I fear it will pale in comparison to the real-life horrors about to be unleashed."

Cyclops's eyes widened. His throat felt dry. "What time is it?" he croaked.

"Midnight," said Lady Mastermind with satisfaction.

And even as she spoke, Scott heard the dull crump of an explosion from somewhere above him, and knew what it had to be. The first trident firework. The first Legacy bomb.

A door loomed ahead of the Beast, but he could already hear the bolts on its far side being drawn back: Phoenix had employed her telekinesis without breaking her step.

Likewise, Hank shouldered his way through the obstruction as if it weren't even closed, and the two X-Men burst out onto the flat roof of the Hellfire Club building.

They were greeted by the true face of the organization: the face that most of its members never saw, but with which they were only too familiar. The uniformed agents, a dozen in all, were concealed from the guests below by a waist-high parapet. They were gathered around a rocket-shaped firework, four feet tall, held vertical by an A-shaped metal frame. A long fuse dangled ominously from its lower end.

As the heroes had hoped, their sudden entrance had taken the mercenaries by surprise: they were scrambling to their feet, still reaching for their guns, when the Beast threw himself at them, tucked in his arms and legs and barreled through them like a bowling ball.

I'll keep the goons occupied, Jean teleported to him as he landed nimbly beside the A-frame. You see to the rocket.

She was gesturing with her hands, causing rifles to spring from their owners' grasps or their barrels to bend back upon themselves. But some of the agents had set their sights on the Beast. He delivered a roundhouse punch to one, toppling him into the man behind him and avoiding a retaliatory strike with a deft handspring, which also gave him the opportunity to plant his foot in another man's face. "Excuse me sir," he said, catching sight of an agent with a tool belt slung around his waist, "but could I trouble you for a short loan of your screwdriver?" The agent swung the butt

of his bent rifle at the X-Man, but Hank ducked beneath it and plucked his prize from its pouch. “Thank you,” he said as he straightened and sent the bemused technician reeling with an uppercut to the jaw, “and goodnight!” Two more men tried to rush him, one from each side—but he dodged their blows, planted his hands on their shoulders, pushed himself upward and bounced off their heads, somersaulting over the rocket to land on its far side.

Thus distanced from the melee, Hank began to disassemble the pyrotechnic device, using his claws to pry loose its plastic shielding and the screwdriver to disconnect the circuit boards within. The rocket had an onboard processor: Shaw and Magneto had spared no expense to ensure that the evening went with a bang, so to speak. It was a delicate task—he couldn’t afford to upset the rocket’s payload, nestled in its plastic heart—and not for the first time, the Beast cursed the big, clumsy hands that his mutant gene had given him.

He tried not to let the sound of gunfire distract him, even though he heard an awful lot of it. There was a limit to how many bullets his teammate could deflect until, exhausted, she failed to see one coming in time. Nevertheless, he also heard a satisfying number of male grunts and cries, and the smack of flesh against flesh, as Phoenix kept her foes off-balance and hurtling into each other. Even those who were able to reach her were doubtless learning that, for all her psionic prowess, she had not neglected her physical training.

It was when the agents *stopped* firing, Hank supposed, that he would have cause to worry.

He could see a test tube now, so small and slender. He threaded two of his clawed fingers through the workings of the rocket and gingerly took hold of it, willing himself not to tremble, not to place too much pressure on the fragile glass. The tube looked empty, but its invisible contents were deadly. He realized that he had begun to sweat. Holding his

breath, he manipulated the tube until he had dislodged it from its molded cavity.

All he had to do now was draw it back toward him.

And then, a Hellfire Club agent came flying through the A-frame, splintering it. The rocket fell one way, and the Beast the other as a head cannoned into his stomach.

Sorry, came Jean's abashed telepathic voice. Slip of the mind. No harm done, I hope?

Lying on his back, Hank felt the tube in his hand, and lifted it to his eyes. He felt as if his heart wouldn't beat again until he had dared to look at it-but, miraculously, it was intact and still stoppered. Relief washed over him.

Until the fallen mercenary kicked his hand and sent the test tube flying out of it.

The Beast let out a horrified cry as it described an arc toward the edge of the roof. Pushing his muscles to their limit, he practically leapt into the air from a lying start, but the mercenary tripped him. Perhaps he didn't know what he was doing. Or perhaps he thought that, if the trident firework couldn't spread the Legacy Virus into the atmosphere, then at least it could be released at ground level. Perhaps he expected to gain Shaw's approval for his quick thinking. Perhaps he would even be granted a measure of the vital cure.

In the end, the agent's motives didn't matter. It took the Beast a second to get past him—and that was a second too long.

He reached the parapet, looking out over the lights of the harbor. Closer to him, and two stories below, he saw the heads of Shaw's guests-and the test tube, disappearing between them. Time seemed to have slowed down, the tube dropping in slow-motion; even so, there was no way to reach it before it shattered on the flagstones.

And then, incredibly, its fall was reversed. The tube sprang back up toward Hank as if attached to an elastic cord, and he reached for it, but it sailed past him and into

Phoenix's hand. She was standing at the parapet beside him, and she flashed him her radiant smile. Behind her, he saw that the last Hellfire Club mercenary had fallen.

And then, from below, he heard Cyclops's voice: an agonized howl of "Nooooo!"

The X-Men's field leader was almost directly beneath the Beast, at the building's French windows. His arms were spread out behind him, and his knees slightly bent as if something were restraining him. To one side of him was Sebastian Shaw; to the other was Lady Mastermind—it took Hank a moment to recognize her out of costume— with Storm lying unconscious at her feet. Clearly, she was the cause of Cyclops's distress.

The Beast vaulted over the parapet without stopping to think twice. He slowed his descent with a somersault and made to land lightly on his feet. But he hit the ground an instant before he expected to, unprepared for the sudden impact, which jarred his bones and made him lose his footing. Later, when he had a moment to think, he would realize that Mastermind had seen him coming and cast an illusion, making him believe that the ground was further away than it was. Right now, he was just grateful not to have broken a leg. He was still trying to get his breath back when he became the target of ten or more party guests, emboldened by his fall. They leapt upon him, punching and kicking and spitting racial slurs. He kept his head covered with his hands until he saw a way through them. He propelled himself through one man's legs, tripping him in the process and bringing down three more like dominoes.

While the Beast was still on his hands and knees, somebody hit him from behind with a walking cane. He winced and turned on the culprit, seizing the weapon on its next downward stroke and using it to pull himself to his feet before knocking it aside contemptuously. He was still a little shaky, but the mob were a lot less gung-ho now that their target was no longer on the ground. Hank bared his fangs,

hoping to bluff them into keeping their distance. Two of his erstwhile attackers simply turned tail and fled.

And then, he felt an explosion inside his head, and before he knew it, he was on his knees again. It was a supreme effort to prop his eyes open, to keep himself from toppling onto his face. Somebody had invaded his mind.

And, looming over him, he saw her, a smile on her lips and a sadistic glint in her eye.

It was Tessa.

Shaw spun Cyclops around and punched him in the face. The X-Man staggered, looking bewildered as if he didn't know where he was or what was happening to him. He was obviously still in Lady Mastermind's thrall, trying to reconcile what he was feeling to what he could see and hear. Shaw punched him again, obviously relishing this show of force, and Cyclops went down.

Watching from above, Phoenix narrowed her eyes and formed a field of psycho-kinetic energy around the Black King, lifting him away from her husband. Now, it was his turn to be confused as his feet pedaled air and his arms waved helplessly, not knowing what to do to maintain his balance. By the time he was level with her, however, floating on the far side of the low parapet, he had adjusted to his situation. He clenched his fists and glared at Phoenix furiously, but there was nothing he could do.

"Why don't you try your luck with someone who can fight back, you loathsome little man?" she snarled.

"Gladly, my dear," he growled in return, "if you would only put me down."

"I might just do that," she said, "and faster than you expect."

Shaw said something else, but Phoenix wasn't paying attention. She was talking to Cyclops through their telepathic link. He was just getting to his feet, but Mastermind had him believing that he was surrounded by a dozen past and present members of Shaw's Inner Circle. He

raised his hands slowly, but Jean could read his thoughts as he worked out who was the weakest member, the one to target as he made his break.

Scott, listen to me! she urged him. Whatever you're seeing, whatever you think is happening, I want you to fire a half-strength optic blast at ten o'clock . . . now!

He didn't hesitate for a second. He snapped his head around to the ten o'clock position and unleashed the power of his eyes. A scarlet energy beam thudded into Lady Mastermind's chest, taking her by surprise, and she was thrown backward to land in a crumpled heap.

Most of the guests had dispersed now, terrified as the violence had escalated, and Phoenix could hear police sirens approaching. She turned her attention to Tessa, but Storm had already woken, and a lightning bolt struck the ground beside the novice telepath. Startled, Tessa leapt back and lost her psi-grip on the relieved Beast. He jumped up and dispatched her with two quick blows, catching her as she fell and laying her down gently. As Storm carried Cyclops up to the roof, Hank scaled the building himself, finding toeholds in the window frames and brickwork.

By the time the police arrived, the four X-Men had relocated to another dark rooftop, several blocks inland. Phoenix had dragged a reluctant Shaw along with them, and he scowled mutinously at each of them in turn as they encircled him.

"We've disarmed your bomb, Shaw," said Phoenix triumphantly, displaying the seemingly empty test tube. "We'll be taking this back home with us to dispose of it safely."

He responded with a deliberate shrug. "There are many more." "We should return to the Blackbird," suggested Storm, "and contact Professor Xavier. He can send reserve teams to find and dismantle some of the other devices, while we deal with the ones nearest to here." "You can't possibly reach them all in time," sneered Shaw.

“He’s right,” said Phoenix. “There’s less than twenty minutes to go before midnight.”

“But the time difference gives us an advantage,” said Cyclops. “The fireworks are meant to form a chain between Hellfire Clubs across the world, from east to west. The next one must be at the branch in Hong Kong. Midnight won’t strike there for another two hours. In the Blackbird, we could make that deadline with time to spare.”

“At the risk of dampening your optimism,” said the Beast, “the Hellfire Club also has headquarters elsewhere in that time zone: in Perth, in Western Australia.”

“And Hong Kong is Shaw’s home base,” said Phoenix gloomily. “He’s unlikely to have left it unguarded.” She glanced sharply at the Black King, but his face gave nothing away.

“We still have a chance,” insisted Cyclops. “Even if we can’t reach all the devices in time, we can deal with most of them.”

The Beast shook his head. “Regrettably, it would not ease our predicament. This particular strain of Legacy was engineered to be highly contagious. If a single capsule is released into the atmosphere, then the consequences will be no less certain, albeit slower to ensue, than if they all are. Unless the United Nations were both willing and able to place entire countries in quarantine, the infection would spread worldwide.”

“It hardly bears thinking about!” said Phoenix.

“And presumably,” said Storm, “even if we could reach all the devices in time, there’s nothing to stop Magneto from releasing the virus another way?”

“Indeed not,” said the Beast. “He would merely have to break open a capsule such as the one that Jeannie is carrying-and he could do so tomorrow if he wished, in any city that took his fancy. We would have robbed the Hellfire Club of its grandiose gesture, its macabre joke upon the

world—and we might have slowed Magneto down—but no more than that.”

“Then there’s no other option,” said Cyclops. “We have to take back that cure. If Magneto doesn’t have sole possession of it, he can’t use it to blackmail anyone. Perhaps he’ll even forget this mad scheme altogether.”

The Beast looked at Shaw. “I don’t suppose he left a sample of the serum with you?” The Black King’s lips tightened into a thin line. “No,” sighed Hank, “I didn’t *think* that sounded like our old and trusting friend.”

“Shaw can still help us though,” said Cyclops.

Shaw raised a quizzical eyebrow. “And what makes you imagine I would want to? I think I know you well enough to dismiss any intimations of violence toward my person.”

“Nevertheless,” said Storm, “the X-Men could do a great deal of harm to your reputation, and to both the Hellfire Club and Shaw Industries, were we to put our minds to it.”

“But let’s skip the threats,” said Cyclops. “You’ll come to Genosha with us because you intended to turn on Magneto all along-and, whatever your plans were, we’ve put a spoke in your wheels. If you want to stop him now, you’ll have to do it our way.”

Shaw inclined his head slightly as if in agreement.

“What’s the plan?” asked Phoenix.

“We fly out in Shaw’s private jet: it’s almost as fast as the Blackbird, and it should get us into Genoshan airspace without being attacked. After that, we take everything Magneto can throw at us—and we get that cure from him, whatever we have to do. With any luck, our team on the ground might also have learned something we can use.”

“We know that, when they arrived in Genosha last night, Magneto wasn’t present,” said the Beast thoughtfully,

“Perhaps they were able to make some headway-or even discover the whereabouts of the cure—in his absence.”

“Perhaps,” said Cyclops grimly, “but I used my comm-set to contact the Blackbird’s onboard computer on the way

over, and they haven't radioed in. Until we hear otherwise, we have to assume that we're on our own."

Tessa had a headache, but the detective wouldn't stop asking questions. She squirmed impatiently in Sebastian Shaw's seat, behind his desk, as the thickset man with short, graying hair appeared to copy her every word into his notebook in tortuous longhand.

She had recovered consciousness just as the police cars and an ambulance had arrived, and she had immediately sent a telepathic instruction to the leader of Shaw's squad of mercenaries to keep his men hidden. She had assured an anxious paramedic that she needed no treatment, driving home the message with a gentle mind-push when he had proved infuriatingly insistent. She was on the verge of resorting to such methods again,

"How many more times do we have to go through this, Sergeant Grace?" she sighed. "I don't know where the mutants came from, and I don't know what they had against the Hellfire Club, if anything. They appeared to be fighting each other; perhaps we simply got caught in the middle of an internecine squabble."

The policeman nodded. "I can see that, Miss, er... Tessa, but I'm still worried about these reports from some of your guests that a . . ." He referred to his notes, slowly leafing back two pages. ". . . Sebastian Shaw—your employer—was carried away by one of these mutants."

"I told you," she said tersely, "I saw Mr. Shaw myself after the attack, and he was perfectly unharmed. Your men were already on the premises—I'm surprised you missed him."

"I would still like to speak to him, Miss Tessa," said Grace, "just to tie up my notes."

"He had urgent business to attend to. He was forced to leave." "At midnight?"

"The Hellfire Club is an international organization, Detective Sergeant. It is still morning in New York. I will ask

Mr. Shaw to call in at your station as soon as he returns. In the meantime, he has authorized me to answer your questions.” Tessa got to her feet impatiently. “So, unless there is something else ... ?”

Grace remained stubbornly seated. “You must be able to contact Mr. Shaw?”

She was about to give him a tart answer when the door to the office opened, and Regan Wyngarde strode in. Tessa’s eyes widened in alarm at the sight of her, brazenly wearing her combat leathers-but the policeman smiled and stood to shake her hand.

“There will be no need for that, thank you, Tessa,” she said. “I have been able to reschedule my appointments. Under the circumstances, I thought it best.”

“Sebastian Shaw, I assume,” said Grace-and Tessa smiled to herself as she peered into his mind and saw the fiction that Lady Mastermind had created for him.

Grace asked a few more questions, and Tessa fed the answers to Lady Mastermind telepathically, ensuring that they tallied with her own-and, just as importantly, that they were short and to the point. She breathed a secret sigh of relief when Grace finally acceded to being escorted out of the building by the person whom he believed to be Sebastian Shaw. She had better things to worry about than an inquisitive policeman.

By now, Cyclops, Phoenix, Storm and the Beast were no doubt on their way to confront Magneto. She only hoped that they could stop him from committing an atrocity, and that their escape hadn’t hindered any plans on Shaw’s part to do likewise. Encouraged as she was, however, by this turn of events, she couldn’t help but wonder about one thing.

The X-Men, Tessa was sure, couldn’t have got free by themselves. So, if she hadn’t helped them—who had?

CHAPTER 12

IN HIS fever-induced dream, Wolverine was fighting for his life.

He was surrounded by his greatest foes: the feral killer known as Sabretooth; Lady Deathstrike, who had turned herself into a part-machine creature for the sole purpose of destroying him; Magneto, even. The list was endless. They came at him from all sides, punching, clawing, biting-and no matter how many times he hit them, how many times his claws sliced through their flesh, not one of them fell.

The reverse, however, also held true. He was battered and bloodied, his costume and the skin beneath it torn. One of his eyes was half-closed by a purple swelling and at least two of his ribs were broken. But Wolverine fought on.

Dimly, through a red haze, he recognized that the dream mirrored his immune system's real-life struggle against the Legacy Virus-and the knowledge spurred him onward, doubling his determination to be the last man standing.

There was an animal inside the man called Logan, and sometimes it scared him. Sometimes, he felt he didn't belong with the X-Men, couldn't adhere to their simplistic moral code-but it was they who had helped him bring the animal under control. No matter how many times he had thrown their naive compassion back in their faces, they had not given up on him. Without them, he might have lost all reason by now, given in to his savage side. He had been there, and he didn't want to live like that.

Sometimes, however, the animal was a source of strength-and he gave in to it now. He let his mind sink into a tar pit and his instincts take over. He didn't think about what he was doing, he just put all his heart and soul into the savage fight for survival.

He was only half-aware of being woken, of skinsuited mutates bending his arms behind him. He lashed out blindly as if they were the villains from the dream—and if a tiny part of Wolverine's mind sensed that something was wrong, then it was overwhelmed by his satisfaction as his attackers fell down and didn't get up again.

His triumph didn't last long. His limbs became rigid and his spine snapped straight, jerking his head up. Something propelled him forward until he collided with a wall. He was spread-eagled against it, his face pressed into the wet stone, unable to make his arms or legs move—and, temporarily bereft of reason, he couldn't work out why any of this was happening. He let out a bestial howl, expressing his frustration in the only way left to him. And then, his arms were pulled behind his back again, only this time he couldn't feel any hands upon them, nothing to push against.

He howled again as his wrists were thrust together and he felt cord biting into them. But, at the same time, his body was wracked by another convulsion. Agony sliced through him as his muscles spasmed and tried to double him up but his paralyzed backbone resisted.

Wolverine's eyes rolled back into their sockets, a milky whiteness giving way to the dark.

But he didn't stop fighting. Racing out of the shadows around him were the immortal mutant known as Apocalypse, the armored Silver Samurai, and a hundred other hate-filled faces from his past. He extended his claws, twisted his lips into a snarling, beserker grin and ran to meet them.

Nightcrawler had almost worked his bonds loose when the Priest arrived to collect him. Under his hawkish scrutiny, two mutates refastened the cord around the prisoner's wrists before untying it from the boiler pipes. The Priest took the trailing edge, and Kurt was forced to bite back his resentment as he was led away like a dog on a lead at the head of a ragged procession. With his hands tied behind

him, he had to keep up or be dragged along backwards. He thought about making a break for it—even with the inhibitor helmet on, he still had his natural agility—but he had to see Logan first.

He stooped his head to follow the Priest through the hole into the chapel. The smell of the scented candles hit his nostrils, their smoke blurring his vision. And as he straightened again, his heart skipped at the sight of an unconscious Wolverine splayed across the altar on his back. His teammate's wrists and ankles had been bound to the legs of the sheet-covered table, and thick straps lay across his shoulders, stomach and hips, leaving his bare chest exposed.

"He put up quite a struggle, your friend," said the Priest out of the corner of his mouth as he walked slowly up the central aisle, the mutants filing in and finding seats behind him. "He killed one of my flock and injured three more. They have been placed in quarantine, of course, lest Mr. Logan has spread his unholy infection to them." "And what will you do if he has?" asked Nightcrawler bitterly. "Will you kill them too?"

"The Legacy Virus only takes hold in the infidel. My people, I am confident, will pass this test—but those who fail will be cast out. Nothing is more contagious than sin, Mr. Wagner."

They had reached the end of the aisle now, and the Priest stooped to lash Nightcrawler's cord to a front table leg, just below Wolverine's limp hand. "The best seat in the house," he murmured with a ghoulish smile.

Kurt glared at him, but the Priest returned his hostile look with equanimity as he took his place behind the altar. "You didn't tell me that Mr. Logan's skeleton is laced with metal," he said in a conversational tone. "It would have saved me a certain amount of inconvenience had I known earlier. It certainly made him much easier to control than I expected."

“That’s all you’re really interested in, isn’t it?” said Kurt. “Controlling people. You and Magneto are much alike in that regard.” “Thank you,” said the Priest.

“It was not a compliment.”

“I am sure it was not. I know about this group of yours, Mr. Wagner, these X-Men. I know that, in your own way, you even believe that you are furthering the cause of mutantkind.”

“Then why-?”

The Priest’s voice hardened. “Because you do not have the vision to do what must be done—and in opposing those who do, you cause as much harm as the most ignorant flatscan.”

“And you’re doing all this to ‘further the cause of mutantkind,’ are you?” said Kurt hotly. “These people are as enslaved to you and this so-called religion you’ve imposed upon them as they once were to the human government.”

“Think yourself lucky, Mr. Wagner, that you do not share your friend’s fate. In Magneto’s eyes, you are not yet beyond redemption.

He has not infected you. When I take you into His presence, you would do well to fall to your knees and thank Him for His mercy.” “Yes,” murmured Nightcrawler, regarding the Priest through narrowed eyes. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Your triumphant arrival in Hammer Bay tomorrow. Magneto will certainly be interested to know that you’ve killed one X-Man and taken another captive. You’ll come face to face with your God at last. And what will you ask of him, I wonder?”

“I share his knowledge of the power of magnetism, and today I have proved myself worthy to wield it. I will sit at the Savior’s right hand as his trusted lieutenant.”

Kurt saw the zealous fire in his foe’s eyes, and he realized for the first time that the Priest really believed what he was saying. He responded with a sardonic smile, which

exposed his fangs. "Magneto does not have lieutenants, *mein freund*," he said, "only servants."

The chairs had all been taken now, and the last few mutants were climbing into the room and taking up positions along its sundered back wall. At an abrupt gesture from the Priest, the low buzz of excited conversation ceased, and a deathly, expectant hush fell.

He spread his arms wide, tilted his head back and intoned: "My friends: this is a special day for us. As we gather here to give thanks to our Savior, we have been granted an opportunity to prove ourselves worthy of His love. This mutant—" He glanced down at Wolverine, his thin features twisting in contempt. "This X-Man," he spat, "has already been marked out as a sinner. He has been made unclean. It is our duty now to dispatch him, to disperse his spirit upon the magnetic force lines that it can be born anew." He reached into his white robes and pulled out a polished dagger. Its wooden handle had been carved into the shape of Magneto's winged symbol, and painted in blood red. As the Priest raised it above his head, candlelight glinted off its wicked blade. Nightcrawler tensed. Bound and powerless as he was, he had no chance against the Priest, let alone his followers-but he couldn't stand back and do nothing.

"Let the touch of metal purify this tainted soul!" bellowed the Priest.

And as he began his downward stroke, Nightcrawler sprang, the cord around his wrists snapping tight and forcing him into a backward somersault as his legs swiped sideways across the altar and his feet caught the Priest in the stomach. A gasp rose from the congregation, and several members jumped up as their spiritual leader fell back, winded, and dropped his weapon. Kurt, meanwhile, landed awkwardly back where he had started, and saw the ceremonial blade on the floor. He tried to grip its handle

between his toes, but the cord stretched to its limits and he couldn't quite reach it.

And then, the dagger was snatched from the floor by a Priest incandescent with fury, still not able to stand quite upright but advancing upon the X-Man with a murderous expression. Nightcrawler twisted out of the way of his first thrust, and managed to trip him. But, as his foe picked himself up again, he found himself paralyzed as he had been before, caught in an unbreakable magnetic grip.

"Kill me," he said in a strained voice, "and you lose your audience with Magneto."

The Priest was shaking, struggling to contain his fury—but he appeared to win the battle. He let the hand that held the dagger drop to his side, and he closed his eyes and took deep, calming breaths. Then, without another word, he strode back into position to complete the sacrifice—and as the mutants settled back onto their chairs, sweat beaded Kurt Wagner's brow and he realized that he couldn't delay the fateful moment any longer.

He would have to watch Wolverine die as he had watched the human woman die, helpless, literally unable to lift a finger to stop the murder of his best friend.

But at that moment, an explosion resounded through the mutants' base, and startled most of the congregation out of their seats again. Even the Priest must have been taken by surprise, because Nightcrawler felt control of his own body returning to him. For now, he bided his time, sub-vocalizing a quick prayer of gratitude for the timely intervention.

The Priest recovered quickly. "My friends," he cried, rounding the altar and brandishing his dagger, "we are invaded!" And the explosion had indeed seemed to come from the base's main entrance in the centermost cellar of the long row. "The heathens choose this holy time to attack us, thinking to disrupt our prayers-but it is precisely because we have the blessing of Magneto already that they will not defeat us!"

Galvanized by his words, the mutants roared in agreement and began to pour out of the chapel, squeezing through the entrance hole two and three at a time.

The Priest stood and watched them go, offering his encouragement and the blessings of their earthbound deity, but he made no move to join them. For the moment, however, he had his back to his two captives and appeared to have forgotten about them. Nightcrawler looked desperately for a way to capitalize upon this temporary respite, but saw nothing.

Until, to his surprise and delight, he heard a familiar *snikt* sound, like a pair of knives clashing together, and he turned to its source.

Wolverine hadn't moved. He looked as if he were still unconscious, his skin pale and his breathing shallow. But from the back of his right hand-the hand nearest to Kurt-he had extended a single adamantium claw.

Quickly, Kurt shifted around so that the Priest, if he turned, wouldn't see what he was doing. He pulled his wrists as far apart as he could and felt for the claw behind him, resting the taut cord on its sharp point. And he began to cut himself free.

There were butterflies in Iceman's stomach as he waited, along with a thirty-strong raiding party, at the door of a mid-terraced house in a narrow street. Hendrickson had slipped into the building, and he attached a disc-shaped explosive device to the cellar door before returning to the entrance and counting down the seconds with controlled impatience.

The explosion deadened Iceman's ears: he hadn't expected it to be so fierce. Clearly, Hendrickson had wanted to make a statement. He had blown the door from its hinges, well and truly announcing the humans' arrival. And, even before the smoke began to clear, he was plunging forward and shouting to the others to follow him.

They clattered in single file down a flight of wooden steps, some of the keener and more athletic among them

vaulting the banister rail to reach the floor faster. There were no mutates in the cellar, but-as Hendrickson had conjectured in his briefing-the walls to each side had been knocked through into other basement rooms. The humans split into two groups, taking up positions around each of the rough-hewn doorways. Bobby went to the left, and strained to see into the shadows cast by the dingy light of bare bulbs. Even as his eyes were adjusting, as he became convinced that there was nobody in the next cellar either, he heard footsteps behind him, and Hendrickson's voice: "Here they come!"

And the magistrates' rifles began to bark. "Like shooting fish in a barrel," somebody commented.

Hendrickson had been right again. The mutates must have been gathered in a room somewhere to the right of the main entrance. As they rushed to investigate the explosion, they were easy prey for the humans, who were already in position, well covered and waiting.

They couldn't all crowd around the hole at once, but their onslaught was nevertheless relentless: as one person emptied his magazine, he rolled out of the way and let somebody else take his place while he reloaded. Most of Bobby's group crossed the cellar to join their colleagues, but he stayed put. He didn't want to shoot anybody. A lump formed in his throat as he listened to cries and screams that he couldn't do anything about. He began to wonder what he was doing here, and the only way he could answer that question was to fix an image of Debs's face in his mind.

The mutates had the measure of the situation now, at the expense of several lives. They had found their own defensive position, behind the next wall along, and they returned the humans' fire across the intervening cellar. Bobby jumped as a blast of red bio-energy ricocheted from the brickwork beside him. But, at a nod from Hendrickson, three humans hurled teargas grenades, and smoked their foes back out into their sights. Bobby was grateful for his

mask as some of the gas drifted back toward him, tinting the air green.

Suddenly, Hendrickson was by his side: even with his mask in place, his heavyset form, the stripes of rank on his uniform and his gruff voice were unmistakable. "Nobody this side?"

"No sign of activity, sir," reported a woman next to Bobby.

"Four of you, get down there. Make sure the place is cleaned out from here to the far wall. I don't want any of those freaks sneaking up behind us."

Bobby volunteered for that duty, because it got him away from the front line and allowed him to explore half the base. Perhaps he would find Debs. Along with three of the humans, he advanced cautiously through the next cellar and the next, probing each corner but finding nothing. His colleagues were rather more enthusiastic about the search, overturning furniture and breaking the legs off tables and chairs with their rifle butts. They dashed cups and plates to the floor, beat the stuffing out of mattresses and tore any clothes they found.

In the third cellar, behind a row of wine shelves, they found four beds. Bobby's stomach tightened as he saw that the furthest two were occupied. Two bodies were covered from head to foot with white sheets, which-compared to those found elsewhere in the base-were clean and fresh. He approached the first one on his tiptoes, heart pounding in his ears. Nudging the sheet aside with the barrel of his rifle, he revealed a mutate corpse. It was a middle-aged man with ridges across his forehead, and Bobby felt bile rising in his throat as he saw that he had been crudely eviscerated as if by the claws of a wild animal.

"We're wasting our time," said a woman behind him, her sudden voice making him start. "It's a mutate morgue. We should get out of here before we catch their filthy disease."

“This man didn’t die from the Legacy Virus,” snapped Bobby. “It looks more like he was killed by one of his own.” Or one of *our* own, he thought. But how was that possible?

“Who cares? So long as the freak’s dead!”

Bobby took a deep breath and bit his tongue as the woman marched away. A third member of the quartet followed her, but a young man-about Bobby’s age, as far as he could judge through the combat uniform—hesitated. Bobby threw him a grateful nod, glad to have his back covered as he approached the final bed. He had to see who lay beneath its sheet. He had to see if it was Debs.

But even as his fingers brushed against it, the sheet was flung back, and Bobby let out a startled cry as a short woman with black feathers all over her body sprang out from beneath it. She hit his chest with both hands, hurling him into the wall, and he tried to bring up his rifle, not intending to fire but hoping that the threat would be enough. But something knocked the weapon from his hands and sent it skittering across the floor-and an instant later, he felt the blow of an invisible fist to his head.

He looked for his remaining colleague, but he too had come under attack. A wiiy mutate in an orange skinsuit had been clinging to the ceiling above him, half-concealed by a support beam. Bobby was just in time to see him land on the young man’s shoulders, wrapping his supple legs around his chest and his arms around his throat, and clinging tight.

And then, his first opponent came at him again, screeching like a bird of prey, her talons slashing across his chest and making him thankful for his body armor. Reflexively, he covered his face with his hands and tried to fight his way through her. She gave ground with surprising ease, and Bobby saw for the first time that she was bandaged around her stomach and that a spreading stain was darkening the white dressing. These people must have been patients here. They had hidden when they had heard his group approaching. He felt a pang of guilt: by exposing

them, he had forced them into a fight that they hadn't wanted.

Hacking at her foe again, the bird-woman cut through to his skin. Out of the corner of his eye, Bobby saw his own rifle being raised as if by telekinesis and turned upon him. There was no time for regrets; nor could he disguise his true nature any longer. If he didn't fight back with everything he had, these people would kill him.

He formed a hard shell of ice around his magistrate costume, just in time to protect himself from another swipe of a talon. He bombarded both his foes with a fine hail of snowflakes, momentarily blinding the bird-woman and revealing the feminine outline of his invisible assailant so that, even as her first shot went awry, he was able to locate her and knock her down. He whirled around, intending to deal with the flexible mutate next-but even as he did so, his young colleague slumped to the ground, his neck broken.

And at that moment, the other two humans rounded the end shelf, and skidded to an astonished halt as they took in the tableau before them.

"It's Drake!" the woman screamed. "He was a stinking genejoke all along!"

And they brought up their rifles and fired indiscriminately into the infirmary. Iceman threw himself to the floor between two beds as the invisible mutate was hit by a bullet that hadn't been meant for her and flopped beside him, losing her transparency in death. The bird-woman screeched in fury, shrugging off a shot to the shoulder as she flew at her attackers, talons outstretched. And the flexible mutate avoided the bullets altogether, taking a prodigious leap onto the far wall and bouncing off it to hit the human woman from behind.

Bobby didn't know what to do, which side to fight for. All he knew for sure was that every one of the combatants wanted him dead. But then, as he lay there on the dirty stone floor, he realized what lay beside him, beneath the

final bed in the row: another sheet-wrapped corpse. And he reached for it with trembling hands, feeling a hammer blow to his heart as he unwrapped it and found himself staring into Debs's blank, dead eyes.

Several seconds passed before he could think again, before it occurred to him that the battle had ended. All he could hear was the not-too-distant sound of shouting and gunfire from the main entrance. It sounded as if the mutants had broken through to the central cellar, taking the fight to their attackers. Looking under the row of beds, Bobby saw the shapes of motionless bodies, but he couldn't identify them all.

His rifle lay beside him, dropped by the invisible woman, and he picked it up and rose to his feet cautiously. To his surprise, nobody tried to kill him.

He counted five corpses. It took him a second to realize who was missing—and when he did, he looked up in alarm, even as the flexible mutate dropped toward him from the ceiling. He reacted with well-honed reflexes, dubbing the mutate with his rifle and throwing him off-course. The orange-clad man twisted in midair to land on his feet, and sprang for his enemy with lightning speed. He wasn't strong, but he was fast: he landed punch after punch, but somehow managed to wriggle out of the way of every one of Iceman's own blows. It was all the X-Man could do to keep the mutate's questing hands from his throat.

And every time he threw a punch, he was doing it for Debs, picturing her dead eyes in his mind—and with each miss, he became more and more frustrated, a fiery pressure building in his chest and demanding release.

Somebody had let off a sonic grenade. Hendrickson's group must have been in trouble. Even at this distance, the piercing shriek drilled into Iceman's head and threatened to drown out his thoughts. Everything but the image of Debs. He gritted his teeth and fought on, sweat dripping into his eyes—or was it tears?—as he abandoned any attempt to

think faster than his foe, and just lashed out at random and hoped for the best.

To his immense surprise, the mutate was suddenly wrapped around his gloved knuckles. Perhaps the sonic attack had distracted him too, made him careless. Whatever the reason, Iceman had the upper hand. He consolidated his success with a good head shot, and the mutate toppled backward and fell like a wet sack. Momentarily, Bobby wondered if he had hit him too hard, but in that hate-filled instant, he really couldn't have cared less.

He stood astride his fallen, dazed foe and jammed the end of his rifle into his head as the world around him became one endless, agonizing scream and he was barely aware of anything else. "You killed her, you bastards!" he yelled over the relentless siren. "You killed her!" There were tears on his cheeks, and his hands were shaking.

And the mutate was looking up at him with saucer-wide eyes full of fear.

And then, the siren broke off, but the silence that replaced it seemed somehow louder as if reality were crashing back in around Bobby Drake's ears. And he realized what he was doing, and it filled him with horror and revulsion.

Shuddering, he flung the rifle as far away from him as he could, and helped the suspicious mutate to his feet. "Go on," he mumbled, unable to meet the gaze of his erstwhile adversary. "Get out of here, and keep running. Go!"

The mutate didn't stop to question his change of heart. He ran. And, when a weary and emotionally-drained Iceman rounded the end of the wine shelves a moment later, he was just in time to catch a glimpse of an orange back heading away from the main entrance. He frowned. Was the mutate looking for a hiding place deeper into the base? Or was there a way out down there? So far, the entrance to every cellar he had been in had been well and truly sealed—but it made sense that the mutates would have left themselves an emergency exit.

He made a decision. With Debs gone, he had no reason to be here any more. He would do what he should have done hours ago, when he had first had the chance.

The sounds of battle from the entrance had lessened. Either the fight was coming to an end or the humans had pulled back to regroup on the street as per Hendrickson's contingency plan. The two sides were determined to tear each other apart, each blaming the other for their rotten lives, and the tragedy of it was that neither of them was right or wrong. Iceman could even understand, now, how they had been driven to this. But, whatever the reason, he knew that nothing he could do would stop them.

So, reluctant as he was to do so, as miserable as it made him, he turned his back on them.

And he walked away.

Wolverine's enemies lay dead around him.

He didn't remember felling them, but it didn't matter. It only mattered that he had won. He stood in the darkness and watched as their bodies faded back into the shadows from which they had come. He was panting and flushed from his exertions, and his rational self was resurfacing. He was able to think again, to be aware of his situation beyond the immediate need to kill or be killed. Sometimes, it seemed that every time he gave in to his animal side, his real self faced a harder climb to reestablish dominance. Sometimes, it seemed that the animal must be his real self after all.

He needed to rest now, to let the darkness swallow him. But not for too long. There were other battles yet to be fought. Out in the real world.

He felt hands at his shoulders, coaxing him awake. He felt as if he had slept his deep, healing sleep for many hours, but it had probably been only minutes. He opened his eyes, and smiled to find his best friend there again, undoing the straps that held him down. He could hear fighting, not far away but not too urgent.

"Don't try to move," said Nightcrawler. "Go back to sleep. I'll get you out of here."

He smiled. "Think you can lug my metal-reinforced carcass about, elf?"

"As far as I must."

"No need. Check out the war wound."

Nightcrawler glanced at him as if he thought he might be delirious. Then, gingerly, he peeled back the bandage from his side. Wolverine lifted his head just far enough to see the expression of delight on Kurt's face. "*Unglaublich!*"

"Closed up, huh? I figured as much," he said triumphantly. He had been able to feel that his healing factor was working again, but it was good to have it confirmed. "Looks like this old body still has some fight left in it after all. We won this one."

“By the skin of our teeth. How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted, and weak as a kitten—but fantastic!” He tried to stand, but his stomach muscles felt like over-stretched elastic. He grimaced. “Might need a hand getting up, though.”

“*Sehr gerne,*” said Nightcrawler, “on condition that you do something for me in return.”

“The headgear?”

“I can’t remove it myself. As soon as I reach for it, I lose control of my arms.”

Wolverine closed his eyes and fought down a dizzying head-rush as he was hauled to his feet. He lifted the dome-shaped metal helmet from Nightcrawler’s head, then he leaned against the altar and took in his candlelit surroundings. His gaze alighted upon the mutate Priest, who lay facedown in the aisle, and he turned to his friend with a quizzical look.

“Much as he might like to believe otherwise,” said Kurt, “he is far from being another Magneto. Our old foe could not have been taken by surprise as he was. He would have sensed my approach through his magnetic field.”

Wolverine saw something on the floor beside the Priest’s bald head: a heavy, golden ornament in the winged shape of Magneto’s helmet logo. He grinned wryly.

At that moment, a short, thirty-something woman with gray hair stumbled into the chapel, a wailing child in her arms. Her face was blackened, her eyes red and puffy, and she was coughing fiercely. She carried with her a whiff of teargas, which made Logan’s nose wrinkle. She was halfway up the aisle before she saw the unconscious Priest, at which point she stopped dead and turned pale with fear.

“Louise!” exclaimed Nightcrawler.

“What have you done to him?” she cried. “I need him. My Magnus needs him!” The woman’s concern for her baby seemed to override her fear of the X-Men: she hurried forward and fell to her knees at the Priest’s side.

Kurt bounded up to her, his face a picture of concern. "Let me see him."

The woman recoiled. "Get away!" she screamed. "I don't want you infecting him."

"I don't have the Legacy Virus, Louise," said Kurt evenly. The woman glanced suspiciously at Wolverine. "And nor does my friend, any more."

"She doesn't want our help," growled Logan, "fair enough. Let's get out of here!"

But Kurt was kneeling beside the woman, reaching out to her imploringly. "He isn't breathing, Louise. Give him to me. I can help him."

She hesitated for long seconds. She looked down at the Priest, but it was obvious that he wouldn't be stirring for some time. She looked into Nightcrawler's yellow eyes—and, although she didn't hand Magnus over, nor did she resist as Kurt took him and laid him on his back across a wooden chair. She brought her knees up to her chest, weeping, as the X-Man breathed into her baby's tiny mouth.

"I left him in his crib," she sobbed, "just during the service. I didn't think he'd come to any harm. I didn't know the flatscans would attack. I couldn't reach him! If they've hurt him . . ."

"*Gott sei Dank!*" breathed Nightcrawler, throwing his head back with a relieved grin. Wolverine could see that the baby's chest was rising and falling again.

Kurt handed him back to his mother, who wrapped her arms around him, tears still flowing. "He was so special. I thought he was blessed. A little miracle. How could the Savior turn his back on a child? He's so young-what could he have done to deserve this?"

"He breathed in a little teargas, that's all," Kurt tried to console her. "He should be fine now." But his words didn't seem to have an effect. "You should get him checked out at a hospital," he persevered, "just to be sure. You do have hospitals here, don't you?"

Louise shook her head miserably. "They can't help us."
And suddenly, Wolverine thought he knew what she was crying for.

She turned to him and, hesitantly, as if afraid to hope, she asked: "Is it true? Are you really... clean now? Can you make him clean too?"

He shook his head sadly, and watched the light in her moist eyes die.

"How long have you known?" asked Kurt quietly.

"He's had the sniffles for a week. And ... and last night, I noticed a rattle in his chest. I... I tried to deny it at first. I kept telling myself it was only a cold. I should have brought him to the Priest, I know, but I thought he ... I was scared he might____"

"Every kid gets a runny nose from time to time," said Wolverine gruffly.

"Logan's right," said Nightcrawler. "You mustn't assume the worst."

"Would your God see this happen, Mr. Wagner?" asked Louise with sudden clarity. "Would your God allow an innocent child to suffer and die?"

It was a question that Kurt couldn't answer. Logan saw the pain in his expression, and had some idea of what was going through his head—and his heart.

"Don't wait for the Priest to wake up," said Kurt finally. "Take Magnus to a hospital. They can test him for the virus and treat him if... if the worst happens."

Louise nodded, tears welling from her eyes again. "I know my faith hasn't been strong enough, and perhaps I am being punished for that. But if Magneto can only spare my child, if he can take me instead, I swear I will never doubt Him again."

Wolverine stepped forward. "Listen, darling-" he began. But Nightcrawler silenced him with a gentle hand on his arm.

“Don’t take her faith away from her Logan,” he said softly. “It’s all she has.”

They teleported away, then. Not wishing to materialize out in the open, Nightcrawler took them to the end house in the row: the one into which the mutants’ emergency exit led. He had checked it out before, surreptitiously, fixing its location and layout in his mind. As brimstone-scented smoke dissipated across the deserted hallway, he clutched a pained hand to his stomach. “I have *got* to stop doing that!” he gasped.

“You’re not kidding me, elf!” Wolverine was leaning against a gray-plastered wall to get his breath back. The tandem ‘port had taken a greater than usual toll upon him: worrying proof that he hadn’t yet fully recovered from his trauma. “Tell me there’s a way out of this place that doesn’t involve churning our guts up again.”

Kurt gazed out of a broken window beside the front door. “We’ll have to use the back entrance,” he said glumly. “They’re fighting in the street now.”

There were bodies on the tarmac: more than he liked to count. His sole consolation was that both humans and mutants had now pulled back from close combat. They had found cover behind abandoned cars, and in the doorways and windows of houses on each side of the road. The air between them was thick with bullets and energy beams, but with both sides entrenched in their defensive positions, fresh casualties were few. With a little luck, the skirmish would eventually grind to a halt as limbs became tired and ammunition spent.

“Funny!” snorted Wolverine. “I thought this was what Magneto came here to prevent!”

“Give him his due,” sighed Kurt. “I suspect he tried.”

Logan opened his mouth-but before he could make what Kurt suspected would be a scathing retort, the cellar door flew open, and a man in the mask and combat suit of a magistrate emerged. Wolverine spun around, and let out a

curse. Had he been at his peak, he couldn't have been surprised like this: he would have smelt or heard the man's approach.

For his part, the magistrate was frozen in his tracks. Then, unexpectedly, he stepped forward and blurted out: "Wolvie! Boy, am I glad to see—"

But Wolverine had already sprung at him, snarling with rage, determined to compensate for his oversight.

And Kurt recognized the magistrate's voice, muffled as it had been by his mask-but by that time, it was already too late.

Wolverine had buried his claws up to his knuckles in Iceman's heart.

CHAPTER 13

THE COCKPIT radio of Shaw's luxurious private jet sputtered to life. Through a cloud of static, a female voice said: "Unidentified

_aircraft, this is Genoshan Air Traffic Control. This country has

been closed to incoming flights by order of its sovereign, Magneto. You have two minutes to transmit an authorization code or leave our airspace. Failure to do either will result in your being shot out of the sky. No further warning will be broadcast. Thank you."

"Your move, Shaw," breathed Cyclops.

A knot formed in Phoenix's stomach as the Black King said nothing, continuing to stare ahead into the gray sky with a dark expression. A tense silence fell until, from her position behind the controls of the plane, Storm prompted sternly: "The authorization code, Shaw!"

"I doubt that, even with your hardy constitution, you could survive a missile strike to this conveyance," mused the Beast. "Are you so eager to see Magneto's plan succeed that you are prepared to perish alongside its opponents?"

"Ninety seconds," said Cyclops in a strained voice.

Shaw didn't move. His face didn't flicker. He didn't even blink. "Oh, he'll transmit the code all right," said Phoenix confidently. And Shaw half-turned to face her, an eyebrow arching in mild curiosity.

She smiled at him sweetly. "The only question is, will he be in control of his own mind when he does so?" She leaned toward Shaw, and lowered her voice threateningly. "You know I don't want to do this, don't you Sebastian? Please don't force my hand again."

He returned her stare unflinchingly, and she could read nothing in the depths of his eyes.

“One minute,” said Cyclops.

Shaw nodded abruptly, and reached past Storm’s arm to activate the radio. “Air Traffic Control, this is Hellfire One requesting permission to land.” His fingers blurred across a small keyboard set into the instrument panel, and he sat back with a trace of a smile on his lips.

The radio emitted another static burst, and then nothing else for some time. Phoenix’s anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that, through her psychic link, she could feel her husband tensed like a coiled spring. What if Shaw had betrayed them? What if he had sent a warning signal? Perhaps she ought to have seized control of him after all, taking the information they needed from his thoughts. The idea disgusted her, but the stakes were too high to risk failure. Wolverine would have told her she ought to be more ruthless.

“Hellfire One,” said the voice of Air Traffic Control at last, “you have permission to land.”

And the outpouring of relief in the crowded cockpit was almost tangible.

Storm guided them in over Hammer Bay, and a wave of melancholia washed over Jean as she looked at the scarred and pitted landscape beneath them. She felt for the people of this beleaguered country, wishing that the X-Men could do more to help them.

“Incoming,” reported the Beast. “Two magistrates at eleven o’clock, flying under their own power: mutants, if you can imagine such a thing.”

Jean glanced over. “I’ve got it.”

The magistrates took up positions on each side of the plane, peering suspiciously into the cockpit. The X-Men froze, nobody saying a word, until their temporary escort peeled away again, apparently satisfied. “Well done, Jean!” smiled Cyclops.

“And may I inquire as to what they thought they saw?” asked the Beast.

“Three Hellfire Club agents,” said Jean. “And they mistook me for Tessa.” The procedure required to disrupt the evidence of the mutants’ eyes had been minor, and non-invasive: a simple matter of reordering their surface thoughts. “After all, they might have been suspicious if the Black King had been sighted without his faithful poodle.”

Shaw didn’t rise to the bait. He didn’t even speak as Cyclops placed a gloved hand on his shoulder and gestured to him to stand. “We appreciate your getting us this far,” said the X-Men’s field leader, tight-lipped, “but I think we can dispense with your services now.” Nor did Shaw protest as he was guided firmly toward the rear of the plane. Jean followed her husband quietly, in case of trouble.

But only after the Black King had been bound with rope in his own comfortable quarters did he break his self-imposed silence.

“Good fortune!” he said quietly.

Phoenix returned to the cockpit to find Storm already bringing the plane around over Hammer Bay’s once-bustling airfield. Within seconds, she was beginning her final approach.

Iceman looked down into Wolverine’s eyes, numb with horror. He should have remembered how he was dressed, how it would look—but then, his teammate had not given him a second to explain himself. Even now, he could see no remorse in Logan’s gaze, no reaction at all.

He had always heard that, when you were stabbed, you didn’t feel the knife. It was like taking a punch—until you felt yourself weakening as every beat of your heart pumped more blood out of your body. He felt like that now. He had seen the claws flashing toward him, had felt the solid blow beneath his breastbone—and now, the knuckles of Wolverine’s upturned fist were pressed into his chest as if they could keep his wound sealed. A cold flush had enveloped

11KC llllllUICb clb lie WclllCU 1U1 tilcll UIUlllCin UI tilclCC
Li | * ' ' 154

i rien. vvmverine mined hwhv irnrri rnrn. arm noimv-----
claws had been retracted. "You got lucky, kid," he growled. "I caught your scent at the last instant."

It had only been a punch, after all. Bobby wanted to say something, to voice a protest: *"Is that supposed to be an apology?"* But he was too giddy with relief. He could hardly breathe. He tore the mask from his face and hurled it away, taking in great gulps of air.

"Are you OK?" asked Nightcrawler.

"Don't suppose you've seen any sign of Rogue?" asked Wolverine before he could answer. When Bobby shook his head, he scowled and said: "This ain't good. It's past midnight in Sydney, and three-quarters of our strike team haven't even had a sniff of the target. We need to get moving—that is, if we aren't too late already!"

"Perhaps Rogue has dealt with the situation on her own," said Nightcrawler, but he sounded doubtful.

"I've still got my comm-set," offered Iceman.

Wolverine shook his head. "No point blowing our cover now. If the good guys have won, we'll find out soon enough. If not, we'll need surprise on our side."

He led the way into the back of the house, where he forced a locked window. The three X-Men climbed out into an alleyway, and followed it until it met a street. It took them another ten minutes to find an abandoned car that looked fit to drive. Iceman didn't recognize the make—it was a domestic Genoshan model—but, although the windscreen had been smashed, it hadn't been burnt out like most vehicles on the road. Wolverine popped his claws, pried open the gas tank, sniffed at it and grinned. "Should get us where we want to go."

"It will attract attention," warned Nightcrawler.

"A risk we have to take."

Wolverine dropped into the driver's seat and tripped the ignition like an expert. "Which way to Hammer Bay, elf?" he asked. "I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention on the way here."

"I'll drive," said Nightcrawler firmly. "You need to rest." It looked for a second as if Wolverine would argue—but, to Bobby's surprise, he held his tongue. He simply climbed into the back of the car and rested his head on the seatback.

Five minutes later, they had left the village behind them, and were roaring down an otherwise empty country road. The car's engine ground like a hacksaw, and Bobby kept glancing over at the indicators on the dashboard, nervously. However, as the distinctive buildings of Hammer Bay came into view ahead of them, he found he had better things to worry about than the possibility of breaking down.

He didn't hear the small jet at first, the noise of its engines almost drowned out by that of the car. He only became aware of it as it appeared in the windscreen, having passed low over them. It must have been on its final approach—and like them, its destination was the Genoshan capital. Given that the island's borders were supposed to be closed, it didn't take Wolverine's intuition to guess that the plane was important somehow. Squinting, Bobby could just about make out a red trident symbol on its tail fin.

"I take it back," muttered Wolverine from behind him. "Looks like we might just be in time for the fireworks after all."

Phoenix let out a breath of relief as the mutate guards stood aside, and she and her three colleagues marched into the command center. There had been a limousine waiting for them at the airport—but throughout the short journey here, she had had to maintain the belief in all onlookers that Magneto's visitors were really Sebastian Shaw, his personal assistant and two bodyguards. Normally, this wouldn't have been a problem—but it would have taken just one skilled telepath to pierce the X-Men's disguise. In a country with a

majority population of mutants, Jean had feared exposure at any second.

The guards had wanted to escort the visitors to their sovereign's throne room, but Cyclops had played the part of the Black King well, dismissing their offer with exactly the right amount of contempt. The quartet swept up a flight of steps, and then, after checking that no eyes were upon them, they slipped into the shadows of an adjoining corridor.

Jean had been scanning the building, and she sensed a familiar set of thoughts. "I've found Rogue," she reported. "She's in a cell on the next level up. No trace of the others yet." The Southern X-Man had felt Jean's telepathic touch too, and she welcomed her into her mind. They didn't converse as such; the exchange of information was much faster than that. Rogue simply allowed her friend to riffle through her recent memories.

Phoenix relayed her findings to her teammates. "Magneto has a laboratory in the basement-and Rogue thinks it's where the Legacy cure is kept. She can take us to it."

"OK," said Cyclops. "It won't be long before Magneto realizes we're here. Hank, your job is to free Rogue and find that cure. As soon as you have it, the pair of you should get out of here. Don't risk coming back for us!" A shadow passed over the Beast's face, and Jean could see that he wasn't entirely happy with his instructions. However, he didn't argue.

"And the rest of us, I assume ... ?" began Storm.

"Will keep Magneto busy. For as long as we can, at least."

They went their separate ways, then. Phoenix placed an image of Rogue's location in the Beast's mind, and he loped away up the next flight of stairs. The rest of the X-Men raced along the corridor, no longer hiding behind a pretence. Jean hadn't dared scan for Magneto's presence, lest he detect her psychic tendrils—but she had picked up stray thoughts

from a few of his minions, which suggested that he was indeed in his throne room.

Cyclops didn't hesitate for an instant when he reached the heavy metal door. He attacked it with a full-strength optic blast, which sent shrapnel flying inward. And the X-Men burst into the presence of their greatest foe.

To find that he was ready for them.

Magneto's metal throne had been shaped out of an old magistrate workstation. It stood in the center of the room, dominating it-but unlike, say, Selene's throne, it was not in any way ornate. Genosha's ruler was not interested in the opulent trappings of power, merely in power itself. His throne didn't even look particularly comfortable.

Numerous thick cables straggled across the floor to plug into it, and the arms and back of the chair were festooned with dials and switches. From here, he could presumably override any mechanical or computerized device in the building, and perhaps beyond.

The sloping wall behind the throne was studded with windows, which looked out over the master of magnetism's domain. The setting sun cast a dull red light through the glass. Magneto stood with his back to it, facing the door. He wore his full red and purple combat suit, and his metal gladiator's helmet. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his eyes burnt with white-hot contempt for his three uninvited visitors. The shrapnel from the door hung in midair before him, a cloud of twisted scraps of metal.

"I'm dismayed," he said, "that you apparently think so little of me. Did you really believe I would be taken in by such an obvious ruse? No, I allowed you to enter my country for one reason alone: because you have proven yourselves too dangerous to remain free."

With a nod, he sent the shrapnel flying back toward them with the force of a hundred bullets. But Phoenix had anticipated such a move. It was hellishly difficult to seize so many small objects in her telekinetic grip, but she

succeeded in deflecting those that would have caused herself or her friends harm. A telekinetic force bubble would have been more effective—but this way, there was nothing to stop her teammates from rushing to the counterattack even as the metal shards clattered off the wall behind them.

Between them, Cyclops and Storm wielded some of the most powerful mutant energies yet identified—but Magneto had surrounded himself with a barrier of magnetic force, which coped admirably with the combination of energy beams and lightning. Phoenix held back, trying to remain inconspicuous as she probed at the psi-shielding in his helmet. If she could penetrate it, she could take him in a second—but Magneto knew the X-Men's abilities and strategies too well. Ignoring his closer foes, he extended a hand toward Jean and took control of her magnetic field. As she rocketed into the air, she was forced to break off her assault to concentrate on keeping herself from being dashed against the ceiling. Magneto hurled her this way and that, faster than she could apply the telekinetic brakes: it was like playing a furious game of Ping-Pong, with her body as the ball. She cannoned backward into one wall, the impact winding her. Magneto tried to press his advantage by slamming her into the floor, but she caught herself in time.

Cyclops had switched tactics, aiming his optic blasts between his enemy's feet. He blew a hole out of the floor, but Magneto simply levitated himself above it. Still, the distraction was enough to make him momentarily lose his hold on Phoenix. She flashed a quick telepathic message to Storm before trying to overbalance him by pulling his legs, force field and all, out from beneath him. The X-Men's weather elemental applied a well-timed gust of hurricane-force wind—and Magneto staggered back and fell against his throne.

The expression on his face was priceless: a mixture of astonishment and fury. Cyclops hammered at his force field again—and this time, some of his ruby energy penetrated it,

and his target flinched as if stung. The X-Men had gained an early advantage, but they couldn't afford to let up. Their opponent was too dangerous, especially when cornered. They hammered at him, hitting him with everything they had, just trying to keep him down.

And then, the throne itself reared up, grinding and screeching as Magneto reconfigured its metal components into the shape of a gigantic fist. It hurtled toward Storm, who tried to fly out of its path— but the fist reacted with the speed of Magneto's thoughts. It struck her in the back, and knocked her out of the air. With a wide-angle blast, Cyclops blew the fist to smithereens—but Magneto simply reformed it, the fragments coming back together as if in a piece of time-lapse photography shown backward. It swooped toward Phoenix next, and she only avoided it by leaping aside and simultaneously giving it a TK push away from her. It thudded heavily into the floor, almost punching through it.

Magneto was back on his feet now. "No matter how many times I spare you," he raged, "you won't learn your lesson. You keep trying to thwart my ambitions!"

"And no matter what you do, Lensherr," contested Cyclops, "you'll never change that. Even if you kill us, people will always rise against a tyrant like you!"

He shoulder-charged Magneto, but rebounded from his field as if he had run full-tilt into a rock wall. Magneto then felled him with three powerful punches in quick succession, apparently relishing the use of his physical strength. Storm came at him again, but she was still groggy and she couldn't get out of the way as the metal fist encircled her, turning into steel bands that pinned her arms to her sides.

Magneto turned on Phoenix, then, and she gasped as she was buffeted by a wave of magnetic energy. When she was able to open her eyes again, she found herself pinned against the wall, her feet not quite touching the floor, Magneto's sneering face an inch from hers. "I ought to be insulted," he said, his anger having lessened now that he

had the upper hand, “that you thought it would take only three of you to defeat me. I have fought three times as many X-Men to a standstill.”

She could feel him in her veins, controlling the iron in her blood, exerting just enough pressure for her to start to feel the pain. Just enough to remind her that, should he so wish, he could turn that pain into unbearable agony. He could kill her in a heartbeat.

“We’ve always stopped you before,” she said, defiant nonetheless, “no matter the odds.”

“Oh, my dear Jean.” Magneto shook his head like a disappointed father. “So proud, so stubborn, so strong. I have allowed myself to harbor such high hopes for you. You could accomplish so much at my side, if only you would see the world as it truly is, if you could forget the naive dreams of your mentor.”

He let her go, and she fell to the ground, exhausted and aching inside.

“Of course,” he said, looking down at her with a dark smile, “you didn’t really *expect* to win this battle, did you? You only thought to keep me occupied for a time. Perhaps you thought I would have forgotten so soon that I encountered *four* X-Men in Sydney. It was a futile gambit. That Legacy cure is important to me, Jean. It is the foundation stone upon which I will build a new, more peaceful world. Henry McCoy will not leave the building with it.”

Phoenix summoned all her remaining strength, and tried to hit him with a psi-bolt. She must have reached his mind, because his lips tightened and his nostrils flared—but if she caused him any more than a minor twinge of pain, he certainly didn’t show it. His eyes flashed angrily, and he delivered a stinging, backhanded blow to her cheek.

And, at that moment, the windows behind him exploded.

The three missing X-Men rode into the throne room on an ice slide, glass shards flying before them. They were a

mismatched bunch-Nightcrawler in his red tunic, Wolverine wearing nothing but a frayed pair of khaki shorts and Iceman dressed in, of all tilings, a magistrate's uniform—and Jean could hardly imagine what they must have been through to get here. But right now, she would have been hard pressed to think of a more delightful sight.

The cavalry had arrived.

The Beast put a foot against the wall to brace himself, wrapping both hands around the metal tube that clamped Rogue's arm to that same wall. He strained with all the power of his sinews to tear it loose—but, even with the addition of his teammate's much greater strength, he couldn't make it budge.

"I should have known that matters were proceeding with a suspicious lack of difficulty," he muttered under his breath. Phoenix's directions had taken him straight to Rogue's cell, where he been surprised and pleased to find no guards posted outside. Just as happily, the simplistic lock had yielded to his manipulations after only a couple of minutes. The restraints around Rogue's arms and legs, however, must have been created by Magneto using his control over all things metal. They had no clasps or keyholes, nor even seams into which he could pry his clawed fingers. And they were riveted firmly to the metal-plated wall.

Rogue looked weary, her face streaked with sweat and her striped hair in disarray. Hank wondered how long she had been forced to hang in this uncomfortable position, her limbs splayed out behind her. "I'd suggest you go on without me," she said bravely, "but last time I was there, Magneto's lab was guarded by one of Shaw's watchdogs." "Anyone whose acquaintance I have previously made?" "Holocaust." '

"Holocaust?"

"Armored bruiser from some alternative dimension or other. Used to call himself Nemesis."

"I'm familiar with him," said Hank, chagrined. "My outburst was prompted rather by the belief that his powers are considerably more than a match for our own."

"We'll see about that," growled Rogue through gritted teeth. "We're X-Men. We don't give in to anyone or anything. Not Holocaust, and not these blasted manacles!"

"On three?"

She nodded. Hank counted down, and they bent their combined strength to one final supreme effort. To the Beast's satisfaction, it bore fruit; the metal tube was wrenched from the wall, and Rogue's right arm was freed. After that, the left came easier: she could pull at this restraint with both hands, while the Beast supported her so that, still held by the legs as she was, she didn't fall to the floor face first.

"Leave Holocaust to me," said Rogue as they worked together on her final manacle. "I can take him."

"Pardon my skepticism," said the Beast. "I was under the impression that you had put that claim to the test already today-and that this period of incarceration was the result."

"I'll be ready for him this time," said Rogue stubbornly. "I don't have to beat him outright, anyhow-so long as I can keep him busy while you do your part."

The Beast sighed. "Cyclops and the others are pursuing a similar course of action with regard to Magneto." Rogue's left leg came free at last, and he waited patiently while she sat and massaged her feet to restore circulation to them. "I cannot claim to feel entirely at ease," he said, "with a plan that involves so many of my teammates endangering themselves against superior opponents on my behalf."

He didn't tell her the rest of it. He didn't tell her about the nagging guilt he had felt since Emma Frost had brought her news to the X-Men's mansion. Nobody had blamed him for helping Shaw find a cure to the Legacy Virus: his friends had understood his reasons for doing what he had. Nobody had pointed out the fact that, were it not for him, Magneto's

plan could not have progressed this far. He had, nevertheless, set into motion a chain of events that had led to this moment. He had ignored the warning signs and taken an extreme risk, in the misguided belief that he could manage the consequences.

And yet, there was an aching hope in his heart too, because there was still a chance that he could achieve everything for which he had aimed. He could retrieve the cure and ensure that it was distributed to the needy. He could save countless lives. The question was, how could he face himself if even one X-Man had to be sacrificed in the process, for his hubris?

“Comes with the territory, sugar,” said Rogue, jerking Hank out of his reverie. He looked into her sympathetic eyes, believing for a moment that she must have read his mind. “The important thing is, you get that cure to Muir Island and you save the whole darn world. After that, Magneto can do what he likes to the rest of us-it won’t matter!”

“It would matter to me, my friend,” he murmured.

Raul Jarrett had had a strange and wonderful dream. A dream in which the Savior of mutantkind had restored him to full health. A dream in which he had visited a distant land at the Savior’s side. A dream in which he had spoken to cabinet ministers and foreign businessmen, seen costumed X-Men and been privy to the thoughts of Magneto Himself.

It had been terrifying.

But it had only been a dream, real as it had seemed at the time. In its latter stages, he had even felt his real-life aches beginning to intrude upon his fantasy. He had a distant recollection of waiting outside Phillip Moreau’s office, his lungs on fire, gasping for breath and wondering what was happening to him; a moment later, he had woken here, his limbs spread like overcooked spaghetti across a hospital bed as his mutant gene failed him again.

Even now, he was sure—from the glimpse he had taken, before white light had overwhelmed his senses and forced his eyes closed—that he was in the private room in the command center, rather than at the dirty field hospital. But then, his head was buzzing, and he couldn't hold on to a coherent thought for longer than a few seconds. The Legacy Virus was in its final stages, causing him to hallucinate.

He was only grateful that, in one of those hallucinations, he had been afforded some respite from his pain. A few sweet moments of relief before the end.

He imagined that he could hear voices.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I've only known myself for a few hours, Phillip."

"We only *had* a few hours to stop that maniac!"

"I don't know *how* to stop him!"

"He has to listen to his cabinet, doesn't he? We should call an emergency meeting. If we could get Pietro back here

. .

"It wouldn't make any difference."

Slowly, Jarrett recognized the female voice as belonging to Jenny Ransome; at least, it had belonged to Nurse Jenny in his dream. Proof, then, that it was not real—that the dream had not quite lost its hold on his waking mind yet—but he couldn't ignore it, couldn't drive it away, no matter how many things it said that his weary brain didn't want to think about.

"You didn't see him, Phillip," she insisted. "He told me about this... this scheme of his to spread the Legacy Virus because he knew I couldn't stop him. And he made it pretty clear what would happen if I tried."

"He threatened you?"

"He didn't have to. I shouldn't even have told you about this. But... "

There was a long silence, broken only by a soft clink of glass against glass. And then, Jenny spoke again, in a quiet, tremulous voice. "Oh, Phillip ... the blood test. . ."

“It’s positive, isn’t it?”

Another silence, shorter this time. Then, Jenny said: “It’s worse than we thought. This is more than just a relapse, Phillip. It’s as if the virus has evolved to resist the super-cell. It’s more virulent than ever.

We could try the cure again, with Magneto’s permission, but. . She dropped her voice to a whisper as if afraid that her patient might be listening. She needn’t have bothered. The rest of his body might have given up on him, but Jarrett’s hearing was unbearably acute, and her words filled his head. “But I don’t think it’s going to work. I think we’re going to lose him-and in minutes rather than days.”

He didn’t hear any more voices after that. Perhaps the dream had ended at last-or perhaps it was just that sleep had claimed him again, and a new dream had begun.

Certainly, the image of the Genegineer, his blurred face hovering over Jarrett as he prepared to operate, belonged to his past. Unless, of course, the time since then had been a dream itself: a tortuous, anaesthetic-induced nightmare born from his fear of being mutated, of becoming less than he had been. A non-person. If that was indeed the case-if he was to be given a chance to live the past ten years or more again-then it would be different this time. He would stand up for himself. He would fight back. He would have to-because he couldn’t face the thought of another lifetime of being a victim. Of being betrayed by humanity, by fate and ultimately by the would-be Savior who had turned out to be a cruel despot after all.

As the pain drained from his body, however, he knew that his days of being victimized were over at last. He didn’t know where he was going, but suddenly he was certain-more so than he had been of anything before—that it was to somewhere better.

He could see his family, but he didn’t know if they were a final figment of the life behind him or his first glimpse of the one to come. He swam toward them through the darkness.

And somebody peeled back his eyelid, and white light stabbed into his skull again.

A voice called out his name as if from the end of an infinitely long tunnel. But he didn't want to go back to that place of bewilderment and hurt, so he ignored it.

Raul Jarrett closed his eyes again, knowing beyond doubt that it was for the last time.

CHAPTER 14

WOLVERINE KNEW from hard-earned experience that there was only one way to deal with Magneto. Fortunately, it was just the

_____ way he preferred to fight: hit the enemy hard and hit him fast.

Seep him off-balance—otherwise, he would strike out through his superb defenses and win the battle in seconds. Nightcrawler and Iceman knew it too, and the trio took full advantage of the fact that their arrival had taken the master of magnetism by surprise.

As they launched an all-out assault upon his force field, Phoenix—who was down but evidently not out—telepathically updated them on the situation, stressing the importance of keeping their foe busy until the Beast and Rogue had escaped with the Legacy cure. To hell with that, thought Logan. They were fighting the most dangerous man in existence. As if that weren't bad enough, his control over metal made Wolverine particularly vulnerable to him. His thoughts flashed back to the time when Magneto had peeled the adamantium from his bones, and drawn every atom of it out through his pores. The process had taken seconds, but the agony had seemed to last for hours. The eventual operation to replace the metal, while less painful, had taken a great deal longer.

He dismissed the image from his mind, along with the unwanted feeling of apprehension that the memories engendered. The anger and the resentment, he kept hold of. They fuelled him. When Wolverine fought Magneto now, he fought to kill—and he Would not be entirely at peace until he had succeeded. It was against the X-Men's code, of course, but they could argue about that later, when the

necessary deed was done. What would Summers do about it, anyway? Throw him off the team?

He raised his right arm to strike again, expecting his claws to glance off the magnetic force field but aiming for Magneto's heart just in case. But something prevented him from landing the blow. A familiar sensation. He cursed under his breath as his arm twisted around in front of him, against his will. Now, Wolverine was looking at the points of his own claws, and straining with all his might to keep them from stabbing into his eyes.

Magneto had obviously gotten his second wind. With a hand gesture, he drew billions of microscopic ferrous particles out of the air and caked them around Iceman. Suddenly encased in a dull gray shell and unable to breathe, the young X-Man fell to his knees and clawed at his face. Nightcrawler was teleporting constantly, trying to keep his opponent disoriented by punching and kicking at him from all sides like a one-man army. But Magneto could sense his passage along the magnetic lines of force, and predict where he would appear next-and, inevitably, a hunk of hurtling metal finally found its target.

By now, though, Cyclops and Storm were back on their feet. Wolverine's control of his claws was restored to him as the room was filled with the flash of electricity and the scent of ozone, and Magneto reeled. Cyclops rushed to Iceman's side and freed him with a delicate but well-practiced, highly-focused application of his eye-beams. As Wolverine rejoined the fray, he fancied that he could also feel the telekinetic influence of Phoenix, straining to part the force field in front of him. His claws were penetrating closer to their target than ever.

But Cyclops was already down again, his feet pulled out from beneath him as a metal fragment ricocheted off his skull. Magneto turned to Wolverine, his weathered face twisted into a snarl, and he strengthened his field and thrust

outward with it. A spike of magnetic energy punched into Logan's chest and knocked him back.

Recovering in a second, he leapt forward again, adding his strength to Storm's winds and lightning bolts, Iceman's ice boulders and Phoenix's telekinesis.

The pitched battle raged on, wearing down its participants as neither side was able to gain any significant ground. As far as the X-Men were concerned, this meant that they were achieving their objective, giving their teammates the vital minutes they needed.

But, for the frustrated Wolverine, it wasn't anything like good enough.

Rogue waited, tensed for action, at the end of the corridor that led to the basement laboratory, watching as the Beast tapped the combination into the numeric pad. To her relief, it hadn't been changed yet. The locking mechanism whirred into action: its painfully long cycle could almost have been designed to give Holocaust time to get into position beyond it. She flew forward before the heavy door had slid aside, her top rate of acceleration turning her into a hurtling torpedo. For a horrible instant, she feared she had mistimed her launch and that she would smack into the door itself. Then, suddenly, it pulled out of her way and she caught the briefest glint of gold plating as she cannoned fists-first into Holocaust's abdomen.

The hulking creature toppled backward, the satisfaction of the moment dulling the pain of impact that shot through Rogue's muscles. She kept on top of him, pounding at the transparent dome at the top of his armor, ignoring the howl of fury that emanated from his fire-shrouded skull face. A blue blur shot past her—and, under her breath, she murmured, "Go, Hank, go!" For all her earlier bravado, she didn't know how long she could keep this up. Holocaust was already struggling to rise beneath her, bucking and almost throwing her off him. She had been trying to keep his weapon arm pinned with a foot, but he yanked it free and

turned its rounded end toward her. Rogue saw bright energy building behind the weapon's holes, and jumped for it, delivering a final kick to Holocaust's head in the process. He fired, and she rolled beneath the explosion, wincing from its heat against her face.

They scrambled to their feet simultaneously. Rogue wanted to duck for cover, but she couldn't take the chance that, if he couldn't see her, Holocaust would target the Beast. She spared a glance for Hank, who was bounding around the large, white room, prying open cupboards and drawers with manic urgency. And she realized that they weren't alone.

A man and two women in white coats were cowering behind a lab bench. Blast it, thought Rogue, she could have done without the innocent bystanders. That was, if they could be considered innocents: clearly, they were doing Magneto's dirty work for him. Of course, like Shaw's scientists, they might not have had the option to refuse him.

She took to the air and buzzed Holocaust, keeping herself out of his grasp but not so far out that he lost interest in her. By drawing him further into the lab, away from the door, she was giving the whitecoats a way out. Two of them took it without hesitation; the final woman, to Rogue's chagrin, must have been too scared to break cover.

She had cracked her foe's head plate. She hadn't realized it before, but she saw now that a hair-thin line crazed across the dear surface. Holocaust's energy-his very self-was seeping out through it, leaving an orange vapor trail on the air. Her heart soared. She was winning.

And then, he caught her with a stunning backhand, flinging her backward across a hard bench. She bounced once, rolled and crashed to the floor. Holocaust was upon her again in a second, hauling her to her feet and delivering another solid blow. Rogue slammed into the doors of an upright cabinet, leaving her imprint in the thick metal. Her eyes closed, but she could hear his heavy footsteps

approaching again—and her brain was screaming at her to get out of his way, but her muscles weren't responding.

She let out an involuntary groan as she crumpled.

"Get away from her, Holocaust!" yelled an angry voice.

The Beast dropped onto Holocaust's shoulders, sprawling across his domed top and covering his head plate with his arms. Blinded, the creature reached up to dislodge him, but the Beast propelled himself away with a kick of his powerful leg muscles. Rogue realized that he had deliberately targeted the crack in Holocaust's armor: he had widened it, just a little, and the vapor trail was thicker now.

"Hank, don't do it!" she groaned. "You're no match for his strength."

"Parity in that department is not required," insisted the Beast, "as long as our other-dimensional friend fails to lay an armor-clad hand upon me."

Indeed, Holocaust was swiping clumsily at him, but the Beast's amazing agility kept him one step ahead. Rogue could even feel her own strength returning, and she started to lever herself up, leaning on the dented cabinet behind her for support.

"I may not be able to hit you," snarled Holocaust. "Pity you can't say the same about your teammate." Rogue froze as he aimed his weapon arm at her again-and, with an anguished cry, the Beast threw himself at the swollen limb, trying to deflect it. That, of course, was what Holocaust had hoped for: with a gleeful cackle, he batted the blue-furred X-Man aside.

Rogue had no choice. She flew at him, even though she hadn't yet fully recovered from her beating. If she could just widen that

crack____ But she never reached it. Holocaust smashed her out of the

air. She hit the same cabinet again, causing it to rock and almost topple. And then, she was staring helplessly up at her foe's lopsided sneer and his leveled weapon arm.

So much for learning from experience, she thought bitterly. So much for her grand plan. This round had ended even quicker than the first, and in exactly the same way.

“That *deja vu* is a bitch, isn’t it!” cackled Holocaust. “This is goodbye, Rogue. You had your chance. You don’t get taken alive twice.”

The Black King stood on the tarmac of Hammer Bay’s small airfield, his hands behind his back and his feet apart, an expression of studied calm on his face as a warm evening breeze ruffled his dark hair. It hadn’t been difficult to escape the bonds in with which the X-Men had left him. Because he had not used his strength against them, they had thought him drained—but in fact, he had been conserving his power, biding his time. He had pulled his ropes apart like strands of tissue paper. So far, everything was going well. Even so, Shaw’s casual demeanor was a mask for the anxiety that had coiled his nerves tight.

A patrolling aircar passed overhead at last, and he flagged it down. As it came to rest on its quiet antigravity jets, he allowed himself another quick glance at his pocket watch.

He instructed the car’s three mutate occupants to take him to Magneto. When they looked at each other uncertainly, he snapped: “Do you know who I am? I am Sebastian Shaw, the head of the most powerful organization in the world. Lensherr *will* see me.”

The mutates had obviously heard his name, because it was enough for them. Suddenly, they became attentive—almost syco-phantic—toward him. One of them held an aircar door open for him, while another got out of the vehicle altogether to afford him more room. A few minutes later, Shaw touched down in the street outside Magneto’s command center, and his pilot offered to escort him to the throne room of the Savior. Declining curtly, he strode into the building. The mutate guards at the main door *did*

recognize him—he had been here several times in the past few weeks—and they jumped to attention as he passed them.

He didn't miss the nervous looks in the guards' eyes, and he soon realized what was causing them. He could hear distant thuds and cracks from the direction of the throne room. The mutants had been well trained not to approach their sovereign's inner sanctum, whatever the situation, unless summoned. Magneto liked to fight his own battles.

Shaw smiled. The X-Men were nothing if not predictable. He had taken a gamble, and he had begun to fear that time would run out before it could pay off. The prospect of a lifetime under a dictator's thumb had loomed like a shadow over him: he had thought about his own future self, turned into a cowering serf by the Black Queen, Selene, and he had hoped that he would have the courage to die before he let such a fate befall him.

But, by bringing him here, by occupying Magneto at this critical juncture, the mutant heroes had given him another chance. The game was in its final stages—but there was still time for his plan to bear fruit, for him to move his pieces into a winning position.

He took a circuitous route through the corridors of the center, avoiding the throne room and its brawling occupants. He had almost reached the infirmary when its door flew open, and two figures emerged at a run. He recognized Phillip Moreau and Jennifer Ransome.

"Shaw!" exclaimed Moreau, skidding to a halt.

The Black King raised an eyebrow, and tried not to betray the feeling of impending triumph that welled within him. If he read the situation right, then it was all he could have hoped for. "I was on my way to check the progress of your patients. Nothing has gone wrong, I hope?"

Moreau made to push past him. "We need to speak to Magneto."

He restrained the young man with a hand on his shoulder. "Magneto is busy." With a wry smile, he added: "As

I expect you can hear.”

With impeccable timing, a tremendous crash resounded from the throne room upstairs. Moreau and Ransome exchanged an uncertain glance.

Shaw smiled, and held out his hands in a magnanimous gesture. “Perhaps I can be of assistance?”

Once again, three X-Men rushed Magneto. Once again, they were thrown back. It was becoming almost a ritual.

Phoenix had linked the six heroes telepathically. They were well used to working in concert with each other, to coordinating their attacks-but this way, each knew for sure what the others were thinking. It gave them an additional edge. Cyclops and Wolverine, for example, concentrated their blows upon the same square inch of their foe’s force field, Scott timing his optic blasts perfectly to avoid hitting his teammate. Iceman and Storm worked together to lower the temperature inside the field, forcing Magneto to expend precious energy on exciting the molecules around him if he didn’t want to freeze. The onslaught was relentless. As Jean continued to probe the force field telekinetically, she sensed it weakening—but she could also feel Magneto’s anger, his determination, like a physical force. The longer he was kept from his laboratory and the cure therein, the more savagely he fought.

He picked up Wolverine and used him as a cannonball, shooting him into Nightcrawler even as he materialized from his latest ‘port.

Nightcrawler collided with Phoenix in turn, and Magneto devoted a small fraction of his power to keeping Logan pinned down, trapping Jean and a dazed Kurt beneath his reinforced frame. He also redirected one of Storm’s lightning bolts to strike Iceman. And, while the X-Men were still reeling, trying to regroup, he drew himself to his full height, spread his arms wide and bellowed: “Enough of this!”

He brought down the ceiling. Phoenix erected a TK bubble around herself, Wolverine and Nightcrawler, and

wished she had the strength to extend it to the others. Bombarded by debris, Storm was forced to land and take cover. Iceman was out. Jean could also sense her husband, using a wide-angled blast to pulverize as much of the plummeting ceiling as he could-but she couldn't see him through a billowing cloud of dust.

Magneto was screaming through the chaos: "You only seek to delay the inevitable!"

But he had lost his grip on Wolverine. With the speed of a striking snake, Logan leapt at him, and plunged his claws straight through his weakened force field. Magneto fell back before him, and Jean thought she could see actual fear in his eyes as he stopped his attacker's claws less than an inch in front of his face. She could see the effort that it took him to push Wolverine back, but he succeeded in doing so nevertheless, and in building up enough momentum to knock him senseless against the far wall.

A scarlet energy beam stabbed through the dust haze, catching Magneto unawares. It struck him in the back, and he fell to his knees with a gasp. But Jean knew that Cyclops couldn't press his attack: a heavy timber had fallen across his chest, restricting his movement, and his foe had fallen out of the limited range of his optic blasts. Then, Nightcrawler disappeared from Jean's side and reappeared on Magneto's shoulders. He wrenched the metal helmet from his head, but was felled by a blast of magnetic force for his troubles.

Phoenix seized her opportunity.

Launching a psi-bolt at an opponent was like attacking him with a piece of her innermost self, seeking to overwhelm his very being with a concentrated expression of her own. In the fraction of a second that it took Jean to strike, at the speed of thought, Magneto erected his force field again—but he was an instant too late. She had almost reached him.

She was only dimly aware of her physical body, in its prone position, clenching its fists and gritting its teeth, feeling as if its eyes were bleeding, as she pushed her way through the final inch of the magnetic shield. But her attack had lost momentum, and she still had to contend with Magneto's natural psychic defenses.

Like the X-Men themselves, he had trained his mind to resist outside influences. But his mind was even more difficult to penetrate than any of theirs: Professor Xavier had conjectured that Magneto possessed latent telepathic abilities of his own, although this remained unproven. Whatever the reason, it took all of Jean's remaining energy to push her way into his psyche, and only a ghost of herself made it through at all.

She was kneeling on moist soil, the tang of iron and blood on her tongue, surrounded by mutants with skinsuits and shaved heads. She felt weak, too weak to stand, but she dragged herself to her feet anyway. Magneto was still trying to rebuff her, to dispel her faint psychic presence, and her mind translated his attack into the unpleasant sensation of her muscles straining to pull themselves apart. She was blurring around the edges, but she had to hold herself together. She had to find him, had to locate his essential self—the part of his mind that she had to shut down—in this cluttered psi-scape. She didn't have long. She fought her way through the mutate crowd, none of whom moved either to get out of her way or to stop her. They were like zombies. Zombies with numbers tattooed upon their foreheads.

If Jean had been stronger, more alert, she would have seen it right away. She would have known exactly which part of Magneto's mental landscape she had intruded upon.

Reaching the edge of the subdued crowd, she found herself pressed up against a chain link fence. With a sense of foreboding, she looked up, knowing what she would see. Barbed wire.

Black-uniformed, jackbooted guards surrounded her. They lashed out with sturdy truncheons, and she folded and almost dissipated there and then. They lifted her by the arms and hauled her away, and Jean chose not to resist. Perhaps they were taking her to Magneto. Perhaps he wanted to gloat before he expelled her from his consciousness.

But the gray, cubic, hard-angled concrete building into which the guards dragged her was empty. One look at the bare walls of its single room, and she began to struggle in vain. It was only after she had been beaten again and flung to the floor that she looked up and saw the nozzles that extended from the ceiling like shower heads. And her blood froze, her heart numbed by the very idea that someone could do—*had* done—this to another person. To a whole race. The room was filling up around her, mutants filing in without protest until there was no space left and they were pressed up against the walls. They trampled Jean, but she couldn't rise from her knees. She had to fight, but she had no strength left. No willpower. Her psychic form was clinging to this realm by its metaphorical fingernails.

And, too late, she knew where Magneto had to be.

She looked up into his creased face and his sad, gray eyes, and the number in blue ink on his shaved head. He was Mutant #0001.

He reached down to her with a spindly arm, and helped her to her feet with apparent difficulty. In the physical world, it was easy to forget Magneto's advanced age, because he burnt with such power and passion. But here, in this corner of his mind, he was an old man, stooped and frail. For a moment, Jean couldn't bring herself to hurt him. She had to remind herself what he was capable of, what he was doing. She had to gather her shattered resolve.

But it would have made no difference, anyway.

The concrete chamber was already fading around her, and she could feel the floor of the throne room beneath her

back again. She was exhausted. She couldn't move, couldn't even open her eyes. For a long moment, the only image in her mind was that of Magneto's gray eyes, and she felt a tear on her cheek.

And then, there was nothing.

Holocaust's weapon arm was almost pressed into Rogue's face.

She had closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, awaiting the lethal blast.

The Beast was on his back, nestled in the remnants of a lab stool that had shattered when he had fell on it. He was winded, he didn't want to move, but he fought to override his weakness. He dragged himself to his feet, but he felt as if he were moving through treacle. He was too slow. He couldn't possibly reach his teammate in time to save her life.

"Holocaust, no!"

The interjection had come from the female scientist: the one who had stayed behind when her colleagues had taken flight. She wore round, rimless glasses, and her blonde hair was tied back into a severe bun. She had only half-risen from behind the lab bench that sheltered her, ready to drop again if the battle resumed. She was trembling, and Hank admired her for having had the compassion to intercede on Rogue's behalf despite her obvious terror.

Or had there been something more to it than that?

Holocaust rotated the top half of his bulky armor, awkwardly, and glared at the scientist. She gave him a desperate, meaningful look. And, when he returned his attention to Rogue, he lowered his weapon arm and raised his equally huge fist instead.

But the two X-Men had had the moment's respite they needed. Rogue scrambled out of the way of a punishing blow that buried Holocaust's fist in the floor. As he fought to pull it free, a stool hurled by the Beast bounced off his head, widening the crack in his protective dome.

The scientist ducked again, with a high-pitched shriek—and the next thing Hank knew, a blast of energy came his way. He leapt above it, and it destroyed a shelving unit behind him. It seemed to him, though, that the blast hadn't had half the power of the last one he had seen. Holocaust was weakening, his life essence pouring out of his breached containment suit. Rogue must have seen it too, because she dared to get nearer to her foe, taunting him. Assailed by punch after earth-shattering punch, he gave ground, arms flailing wildly, and Hank was able to reach the metal cabinet against which his teammate had earlier lain.

It was locked-but the doors were already damaged, and it didn't take much effort to wrench them off their hinges. A wave of cold air hit the Beast: the contents of the cabinet were refrigerated. The top shelf held a rack of thin vials, each containing a measure of a translucent, red-tinted liquid. The other shelves were empty-apart for the bottom one, in which another vial sat in a rack of its own, filled with a darker red and more viscous substance. He reached for it, forcing his hand to stop shaking in anticipation, ignoring the cold bum against his skin as he lifted the vial to his eyes and read its label.

He read his own name, and knew that this was the sample of his blood that Sebastian Shaw had stolen. The sample that contained the super-cell.

And his lips stretched into a broad, toothy grin as he confirmed what he had deduced: that Magneto's scientist hadn't cared about Rogue's life at all, she had simply not wanted Holocaust to fire his weapon at this cabinet because of its precious, irreplaceable contents. He looked at the vials on the top shelf again, and he knew that this was the realization of his greatest dream. The cure to the Legacy Vims. Every one of those vials could save one life.

And he had to destroy them.

It was a matter of logic. If he succeeded in getting the cure out of Genosha, then it wouldn't matter that Magneto

had it too. But if he failed-and there was a good chance of that-then the master of magnetism couldn't be allowed to keep it either. Even so, the Beast felt a hollow pain in his stomach as he forced himself to yank the full rack from the cabinet and let its contents shatter on the floor.

The Legacy-busting super-cell existed only in one place now, as it had before: in Hank's blood sample, which he tucked carefully into a belt pouch. He remembered seeing a freezer cabinet in Shaw's jet: he had to get the blood into it, and get it away from here. And he couldn't let anybody or anything stop him.

Now that he had this vial in his possession at last, he couldn't face the thought of having to destroy it too.

Startled by a tremendous crash behind him, he whirled around-to find that Holocaust had been felled again. And this time, he wasn't getting up. Rogue stood over him, an expression of supreme satisfaction on her face, her fists still clenched. "How's that for deja vu, sugar?" she gloated. "You getting your tail busted by the X-Men again!" With a cruel glint in her eyes, she added: "I bet your masters'll be none too happy about that."

"You assume correctly."

The Beast started again, his eyes darting across the lab to find Magneto in the doorway. He was standing upright but hovering a foot or so above the floor, having evidently approached in silence on the crest of a magnetic wave. Hank's heart sank into his stomach, and his hand went to his belt pouch. Rogue didn't have time to react at all. Magneto gestured toward her, and she stiffened, her eyes rolling back into their sockets and the merest gasp of pain escaping from her throat. Then, she collapsed across the armor of her fallen foe.

Magneto floated into the room and inspected the destruction around him with a hooded gaze, which lingered longest on the sundered metal cabinet and the broken glass beneath it.

He turned to Hank, and loomed over him, his face dark but his eyes aflame. And he held out a purple-gloved hand, and spoke in a stem voice that brooked no argument.

“You have something of mine, I think.”

Waking from unconsciousness was not covered in the X-Men’s formal training, but it was certainly something that they had to get used to.

On this occasion, Storm hadn’t been out for long, and a quick touch to the thin cut on her temple told her that the injury wasn’t serious. She dismissed the muzzy feeling in her head with a combination of experience and willpower, and assessed the conditions of her teammates. Wolverine, as usual, had recovered quickly and was coaxing Phoenix awake. Ororo doused Nightcrawler and Iceman with a miniature rainstorm, which shocked them to their senses and also served to replenish Bobby’s vital moisture. In the meantime, Phoenix and Wolverine worked together to lift the beam that pinned Cyclops— although Ororo noted that Jean didn’t employ her telekinesis.

“We have to get after him,” insisted Cyclops, sounding as if every word were an effort. “The Beast and Rogue can’t handle him on their own.”

“Just one problem there, boss-man,” said Wolverine, sniffing the air. “We got company!”

He turned to face the doorway, adopting a battle-ready stance, even as Sebastian Shaw appeared. The Black King cast a disdainful glance at the feral Canadian, then held up a placatory hand. “I am not here to fight you,” he said.

“Then why *are* you here, Shaw?” asked Storm coldly.

“How did you get free?” asked Cyclops tersely.

Shaw looked at the X-Men’s leader with a pained expression. “Please, Mr. Summers. To judge by the condition of your team, I would say that this is your day for underestimating your opponents.” “If you came here to gloat, Shaw—”

He shook his head grimly. "I came to find Magneto. Where is he?" Nobody answered him, but Shaw surveyed the room through narrowed eyes, and then nodded to himself. "The laboratory, no doubt." He turned to leave.

"Hold on, Shaw!" Cyclops took two steps toward him, fingering the controls on his golden visor. Normally, Storm knew, he would have activated it with his palm studs; the overt gesture was for the Black King's benefit. "You don't expect us to just let you walk out of here and rejoin your partner, I hope?"

"It would be in your interest to do so," said Shaw smoothly. "There is no reason for us to fight any more. My intention is to end this, if you'll let me."

"You have asked for our trust before," said Storm with a hint of bitterness, "but you do little to earn it."

Shaw inclined his head as if accepting the criticism. "In this case, however," he said, his dark eyes gleaming, "I don't think you have much choice in the matter."

CHAPTER 15

THE BEAST stared up into Magneto's fiery gaze, and time stretched like elastic as his clawed fingers surreptitiously teased the vial from his belt pouch. He ought to have destroyed it by now-he was gambling with billions of lives-but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not until he was sure that there was no other choice.

"I developed this cure for the good of mutantkind," he insisted hoarsely, his tongue feeling swollen in his mouth. "I beg you, don't force me to destroy it!"

Magneto's silver eyebrows knitted together, and his lips peeled back from his teeth. His hand remained stubbornly outstretched. "I will use it to save lives. Nobody will be left wanting if they are prepared to renounce their prejudice. On that, I give you my word." "And I accept it," said the Beast quietly. "Unfortunately, I cannot accept your desire to make a distinction between those who deserve life and those who do not."

"If you destroy that cure," said Magneto, "nobody will be saved. You'll condemn thousands of Genoshan citizens, and many more, to death."

"Perhaps so-but such an action would, I believe, end your mad scheme to extend the contagion."

"Perhaps it will not," said Magneto with a sudden flash of anger. "Perhaps I will release the reengineered virus anyway, and give humanity a taste of what we have had to endure."

"I don't believe you possess such a nihilistic streak," countered the Beast. "And I doubt the mutant Messiah is yet ready to martyr himself to his cause." He shook his head. "No, Magnus, I can't let you have my blood. I will not have the resultant death toll upon my conscience. But I appeal to

you as a fellow mutant—as a fellow human being—to allow me to keep it. Let some good come of this.”

“Would you give up *your* dream so easily?” Magneto’s demeanor had changed again, and Hank could see something of the vulnerable, abused child within him: the child who had vowed to reform a cruel world, but who had buried his own innocence in the process. He could see the pain, the desperate plea, in the depths of his deadliest foe’s eyes. “You are all that stands between me and the better future for which I yearn. I swear, I will kill you, Henry, before I allow you to extinguish that hope.”

The Beast swallowed, and his voice was barely a whisper now. “Then I’m sorry, Magnus. I’m sorry for us all.”

And he tightened his fist around the precious vial, and crushed it. The ensuing silence seemed so loud to Hank that it roared in his ears. He fully expected Magneto to exact bloody revenge for his action, but it hardly mattered now. He looked down at his right hand, opening his fingers and staring numbly at the fragments of glass and the blood that he had spilt. Blood on his hands. It seemed an apt metaphor.

And suddenly, he realized that the blood was no longer dripping, or soaking into his blue fur, but rising. In defiance of gravity, it gathered into a red mass before his startled eyes, and floated away from him. It took him a confused half-second to appreciate that Magneto was drawing the blood to him by controlling its iron content. The master of magnetism wore a harsh smile of triumph.

With an anguished cry, the Beast threw himself at his foe, feet-first—a desperate, futile attack. He rebounded from a magnetic force field, and was borne to the ground by a heavy, invisible weight upon his shoulders. He struggled to rise, but found himself on his knees at Magneto’s feet. “I warned you, Henry. I am too close to my goal to suffer any obstacles in my path. The cure is mine, and nobody will take it from me.”

"I think you know," said a stern voice, "that that isn't true."

Hank gasped with relief, and not only because he felt the magnetic pressure upon him lessening. The voice had belonged to Cyclops-and he was accompanied by Phoenix, Storm, Nightcrawler, Iceman and Wolverine. The footsteps of the six X-Men crunched against the debris left by Rogue's destructive battle with Holocaust as they entered the laboratory and lined up before their oldest enemy. They appeared battered and tired, but defiant.

"As I keep telling you," said Cyclops, "the X-Men will always stand against you."

"You're too late," snarled Magneto. "I have the cure!"

"But you can't protect it and fight us at the same time," said Phoenix. She glanced meaningfully at the blood sample, which hung suspended at Magneto's shoulder, maintaining the shape it had had in the vial even though there was no vial any more. "You're holding it together by force of mind alone. The slightest lapse in concentration, and you'll lose it."

"Then you should know one thing before you seek to engineer such an outcome," he said coolly. "By my reckoning, it is eight o'clock. In Hong Kong and Perth, therefore, it is midnight. I am aware that you deactivated the trident firework in Sydney-but by now, the second and third devices have been launched. Their infection has been spread. And as you rightly say, my dear, any offensive against me will result in the destruction of the one thing that can counter it. So, my friends, are you still as eager to begin a fight that will doom the majority of the world's population? Or are you prepared to accept my terms at long last?"

To Hank's surprise, Cyclops laughed in Magneto's face. "Another thing you need to learn, Lensherr: there's always a third option." Sebastian Shaw was standing, a shadowy figure, in the doorway. A young couple stood behind him,

and Hank thought he recognized them from pictures in the X-Men's files: members of Genosha's cabinet, although he couldn't call their names to mind. Shaw cleared his throat, and said: "The launches in Hong Kong and Perth have been aborted. And my assistant, Tessa, is contacting our other branches worldwide as we speak. Regrettably, the Hellfire Club's solstice celebrations will pass not with a bang but with a whimper."

"Shaw!" A dangerous undercurrent rumbled in Magneto's voice. "I expected this betrayal, of course-but I didn't think even you would be so blatant."

"I have not betrayed you," said Shaw. His tone was even, his expression grim. "But the situation has changed. While you were busy fighting these children, your aides couldn't reach you with vital new information."

Magneto raised an eyebrow, and the Beast found that he was holding his breath, waiting to hear what the Black King had to say.

Sebastian Shaw took a pause, as if entirely for dramatic effect, before ending the suspense. "The cure doesn't work," he said.

And, for several seconds afterward, nobody spoke.

"What treachery is this?" Magneto spat the words, but his erstwhile ally was nonplussed in the face of his anger.

The Beast had some idea what he was feeling. His own head was awirl with thoughts. He couldn't accept that, after all he had been through, all he had put the X-Men through, it could end like this. A part of him knew, of course, that it was for the best, that Magneto couldn't proceed with his plan now. But Shaw's cold, hard assertion had robbed him of hope.

Even when he had been prepared to sacrifice the Legacy cure, he had had the comfort of believing such a cure possible, knowing that he had found it once and might do so again. Now, there was nothing. No. He *wouldn't* accept it.

Three weeks ago, the Beast's teammates had visited a possible future in which Selene had had the Legacy cure. His cure. And it had worked for her-hadn't it?

Shaw had seen that future too. Hank wanted to remind him of it, to contest his awful claim. But it was likely that Magneto knew nothing of the averted timeline in which the Black Queen had ruled New York-and if this was an elaborate bluff, a way of wresting the cure from him, then he couldn't risk blowing it. Biting his tongue, he waited and listened.

"If you won't believe Shaw," urged Cyclops, "at least listen to your own people. Jennifer? Phillip?" Shaw stepped aside, and the two cabinet members came forward.

"It's true, Magnus," said the man. "Raul Jarrett is dead."

"The virus returned," expanded the woman, "stronger than I've ever seen it. It ate through his system in a matter of minutes. There was nothing we could do."

"I have just contacted Tessa in Sydney," said Shaw. "She is having your other young guinea-pig examined-but it appears that she too is showing symptoms of a relapse."

Hank swallowed. Ruthless as the Black King might be, the X-Men would never have gone along with a plan that involved murder. And if Raul Jarrett wasn't really dead, then Magneto would find out the truth soon enough. Worse still, the story made sense—as Phoenix now pointed out. "How do you think we escaped from the Hellfire Club in Sydney, when Miranda was holding us powerless? My abilities returned to me, Magnus. We didn't realize it, but the Legacy Virus must have been affecting her mutant gene even then."

"We knew there was a remote possibility of this," sighed Shaw. "The super-cell must have become unstable when it was taken out of Doctor McCoy's bloodstream. It worked for him, but it won't work for anybody else."

"It is feasible, Your Eminence." Hank had almost forgotten about the blonde scientist, but she emerged

timidly from her hiding place now. "And if it's true, it would mean that each Legacy sufferer would have to evolve his or her own unique super-cell."

"In short," said Shaw, "he would have to go through the same tortuous process as McCoy did-which is, of course, impossible since Selene destroyed the Kree equipment and records at our Pacific research facility. The work we did there cannot be duplicated."

It was a good story-perhaps too good-and Hank almost allowed himself to be convinced by it. He probably would have been, had it not been for Selene.

But then, Magneto let out a roar of pain and frustration, and swung an arm with savage force as if knocking aside some invisible opponent. The blood sample that had hung in the air beside him exploded, showering the occupants of the lab with sticky red droplets. And Hank realized that, even if Shaw and the others had been lying, even if the cure had worked after all, then it had just been lost forever. He leapt forward with an anguished cry, but stumbled to a halt in the stomach-wrenching knowledge that there was nothing he could do.

His dream had died.

"You idiot!" he raged instead. "We could have studied that cell. We could have tried to understand it, found a way to transplant it successfully or recreate the circumstances of its creation." His voice tailed off, sounding smaller and smaller in his own ears.

"It's over!" snapped Magneto. He directed a glare at Shaw. "Our business partnership is terminated." The Black King acknowledged him with a curt nod as Magneto stalked toward the door, his cloak billowing behind him.

Wolverine barred his path. "Forgetting something, aren't you? You've put the X-Men to a whole heap of trouble, bub-and we ain't paid you back the half of it yet!"

Magneto rounded on him with naked contempt. Then, the Beast followed his probing gaze to the rest of his mutant

foes in turn. They would fight him if they had to, but Hank saw—as Magneto must have seen—that they were weary, their resolve sapped by the fact that there was nothing left to fight for. Only a pound of flesh that would have done them no good at all. Nightcrawler was helping a dazed Rogue to stand, and Iceman was surreptitiously leaning against a charred bench for support. Even Cyclops looked unsteady on his feet.

Hank felt the same as he imagined they did. He wanted to go home.

“I have no interest in another futile confrontation,” said Magneto, and he sounded tired too. Tired and old-but still forbidding, still rigid. “You are intruders in my country, all of you. Leave within the hour, and I will take no further action. Fail to do so, and you will be dealt with as enemies of the state. Farewell.”

He turned away again and strode out of the room, and this time Wolverine let him go, albeit with his fists clenched and his lips curled into a hateful sneer.

“So, this whole mission was a flaming waste of time!”

The X-Men’s Blackbird aircraft had just taken off from Sydney, giving its eight occupants their first real chance to converse since their reunion in Genosha. Nevertheless, Rogue had settled back into her comfortable seat in the back of the plane, hoping to get some sleep. She was exhausted-and, even with the Blackbird’s souped-up engines, New York and Salem Center still lay several hours away. Wolverine’s gruff voice had shaken her out of the beginnings of a doze, and she sighed ruefully and pried her eyes open.

“I wouldn’t say that,” objected Cyclops. “If we hadn’t become involved—”

“Then Shaw would have called the whole thing off anyway,” said Wolverine, “as soon as that Miranda woman fell ill again.”

Iceman pouted. "Trust Emma Frost to send us on a wild goose chase!"

Cyclops shook his head firmly. "It would have been too late by then. The Legacy bomb in Sydney would have been detonated; perhaps the ones in Hong Kong and Perth too."

"It might not seem like we accomplished much," said Phoenix, "but by delaying Magneto's plan for as long as we did, we probably saved the whole world."

Nightcrawler grinned. "Again? This is almost becoming embarrassing!"

"Don't get too excited, elf," said Wolverine sourly. "The world won't appreciate it."

"Makes me feel a little better, anyhow," mumbled Rogue. She cast her mind back to the long, heavy silence that had fallen in the wake of Magneto's departure from his laboratory. The silence that had said that nobody had won today, because the prize itself had been lost.

Shaw had been the first to speak, assuring the X-Men as he had taken his leave of them that it *hadn't* been a pleasure. Storm had pointed out that he was leaving the wounded Holocaust behind, to which Shaw had replied that his pawn, having failed the Hellfire Club again, was of no further use to him. "Will you never learn?" Ororo had sighed, exasperated.

"Incidentally," he had said as a parting shot, "I trust you can

make your own travel arrangements from now on? You aren't welcome to share mine."

Cyclops had used a low-intensity, high-duration optic beam to fuse the cracked part of Holocaust's armor, preventing him from hemorrhaging any more life-sustaining energy. His act of mercy had sparked a predictable but mercifully short dispute with Wolverine.

And, finally, Jennifer Ransome had offered to send the heroes on their way. One of her cabinet colleagues, an unsavory type by the name of Cormack Grimshaw, had the

ability to convert people into binary electronic impulses. He had transmitted the X-Men to the Blackbird's comm-set via a modem: all in all, not an unpleasant way to travel, so long as you didn't think too hard about it-and Rogue had certainly appreciated the fact that it was almost instantaneous. Remembering the hired motorboat, and thinking that the Xavier Institute could do without yet another bill for damaged or lost goods, she had asked Jenny if she could also retrieve the vessel and return it to its owner in Madagascar.

"We are rather assuming," said the Beast, "that the cure was ineffective from the outset. There is an alternative possibility: one to which I have been giving much consideration."

Phoenix nodded. "I thought about that too. The cure worked for Selene, didn't it?"

"Could she have found a way to stabilize it?" mused Nightcrawler. "Something she didn't tell us about? We've never really understood how her abilities work."

"It is possible, yes," said the Beast.

"But it's also possible," conjectured Cyclops, "that the cure *did* work—and that somebody tampered with it before it could be used." "All of which," said the Beast, "leaves a palpable question mark hanging over the identity of this hypothetical noble soul."

"Could it have been Tessa?" asked Storm.

Cyclops frowned. "I doubt it. She's always been fiercely loyal to Shaw." Ororo's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, but she didn't argue. Rogue wondered what she was thinking.

"You don't suppose... ?" she began. She tailed off in midsentence. It was a ludicrous idea. Wasn't it?

But Phoenix continued her train of thought. "Somebody who had the means, and was close enough to Magneto to have the opportunity. ..."

"But just unhappy enough with his plans. . . ." said Nightcrawler. "And treacherous enough," interjected Storm.

“ . . . to have the motive. ...”

“Best hope you’re wrong,” growled Wolverine, resting his heels on the seatback in front of him. “’Cos if you’re right, it means we’ve all been played for suckers. We’ve just been the pawns in another Hellfire Club game!”

“As far as I’m concerned,” said Cyclops firmly, “only one thing matters. In the hands of somebody like Magneto or Selene, that cure was a threat—which we’ve ended. We might not have the cure ourselves, but even so ... I think we won this one.”

The Black King of Hong Kong stood in his rooftop garden and surveyed his domain.

He never felt more powerful than this: than when he stood at the heart of his self-built empire and looked out over the city that he had come to think of as his own. He had influence here. Between his immediate employees and his wider network of contacts, he could issue almost any decree and expect it to be carried out. And if there were still larger empires to be won, other Kings and Queens to be toppled, then that was good too. It gave him something to work toward: a goal that, on bright mornings like this, he was confident of achieving.

Shaw’s current objective was comparatively modest, but he approached it with no less determination and flair than he applied to all his ventures. The Hellfire Club’s solstice celebrations had fizzled out, but he would compensate for that with the grandest, most hedonistic New Year party that the organization had seen in generations.

He didn’t need to turn and face his assistant. He outlined his instructions and knew that, without having to take notes, Tessa would absorb and act upon them. It was only after he had dismissed her that she gave voice to a question. “Sir?” she said. And Shaw halfpivoted toward her, arching an eyebrow. “Did I do the right thing?” He didn’t have to ask what she meant. He took a deep breath, pursed his lips in

thought, and finally admitted: “The X-Men provided a useful distraction. I am satisfied with the outcome.”

“I’m glad,” smiled Tessa. She hesitated for a moment as if hoping to learn more. When Shaw remained silent, however, she didn’t prompt him. She gave a brisk nod, turned and left.

For a minute or more after her departure, he stared at the door to the stairs that had closed behind her. And then, without having consciously willed it, without even having been aware of the shadow rising within him, he clenched a fist and drove it into one of the pagoda’s struts. He was shaking in frustration, and he had to close his eyes and breathe through it.

She was just another pawn, he told himself. A commodity to be used and discarded. He had allowed himself to become uncommonly close to this one, almost reliant upon her—but that had been a mistake. And he had learned his lesson now. An ambitious man could not afford to be weakened by sentiment. He didn’t yet know for sure that Tessa would betray him—he only suspected that she was like all the others after all—but the seed of doubt had been planted in his mind, and it was enough. When the moment came, he would be ready for her.

By now, she would know what he had done. Most of it, anyway. He had given her enough information for her computer-like mind to work out the rest.

Tessa had always known that her employer was working with Magneto under sufferance, that he intended to keep the hard-earned Legacy cure from him. Unfortunately, Selene’s highly visible intervention had made that impossible. Lacking the physical power to defy his partner, Shaw had been forced to bite his lip and hand the stolen blood of the Beast over to him. But he had had no intention of living in a world ruled by that zealot; a world in which all the real power lay in the hands of one man, and that man was not Sebastian Hiram Shaw.

Fortunately, his influence extended far beyond Hong Kong; even further than Magneto had realized. Until recently, the prosperous Genoshan capital, Hammer Bay, had seemed an ideal site for a new Hellfire Club chapter. Therefore, Shaw had been pulling the strings of its captains of industry for some time; he had even imported many of them. And, at his strongly worded request, more than one such person had resisted his instincts to abandon the suddenly war-torn city for more stable markets elsewhere.

Magneto had had six scientists working in shifts to duplicate the Legacy cure. It had been a simple matter for Shaw's agents to track them down and identify the weakest of them. The master of magnetism controlled his servants through fear, but Shaw had always believed that money—in enough quantity—was a more powerful incentive. In this case, he had been proved right. The transaction had taken place under Magneto's nose.

Of course, the Black King knew the power of fear too. He had sent Holocaust to Hammer Bay, ostensibly as an additional layer of security, claiming that he would feel happier with one of his own agents guarding the Legacy cure. But the presence, and veiled threats, of the otherworldly creature had given his hapless pawn the spur he needed to get the job done.

The scientist had exposed the Beast's blood sample—and the few vials of the cure that had so far been extracted from it—to a small dose of microwave radiation. Just enough to weaken the super-cell, for it to start to break down almost imperceptibly. The results had been unpredictable—and, as it transpired, almost too slow to become evident. Perverse as it seemed, Shaw was grateful to the X-Men for deactivating the trident firework in Sydney, and for kidnapping him. They had bought him time—and they had given him an excuse to be in Magneto's command center at the critical moment.

He had destroyed the hope of mutantkind rather than let it fall into the hands of a despot.

He smiled at the thought that some people might have considered him a hero. But then, like Tessa, those people would have been unaware of the whole truth. They couldn't have known how handsomely Shaw had been rewarded for his calculated act of betrayal.

He felt in the pocket of his smoking jacket for the precious vial. He ought to have secured it in his wall safe by now, but he enjoyed being able to touch it like this. As a tangible reminder of his great achievement, it helped him to dismiss his nagging worries about Tessa and his sundered Inner Circle, to concentrate on what was important.

The vial had been smuggled out of Genosha at some expense, and much risk to the smuggler, while Shaw and the X-Men had delayed Magneto in Sydney. It contained the cure, of course-and this sole remaining sample was pure, untainted. It would work.

The only drawback was that Shaw couldn't use it yet, at least not openly. For one thing, he would attract the X-Men's attention again, although he felt he could handle them. Selene, too, if it came to it. Magneto, on the other hand, was a different proposition. If he suspected what Shaw had done, he would seek recompense-and he was not an enemy to be made lightly.

But Shaw knew how to bide his time. He was used to playing the long game. First, of course, the cure would have to be duplicated in sufficient quantity. That would take time. Then, a few additional months down the line, he could start to use the cure, surreptitiously at first-and if challenged, he would claim to have come by it some other way. Nor would he waste the intervening weeks. He had plans to make. He had a powerful tool at his disposal, and it behooved him to employ it strategically, to maximize its potential worth to him.

In the end, then, this was all that mattered: that Sebastian Shaw had set out to cure the Legacy Virus, and to keep that cure to himself. And that, despite his trials along the way, he had achieved that goal.

The Black King had won.